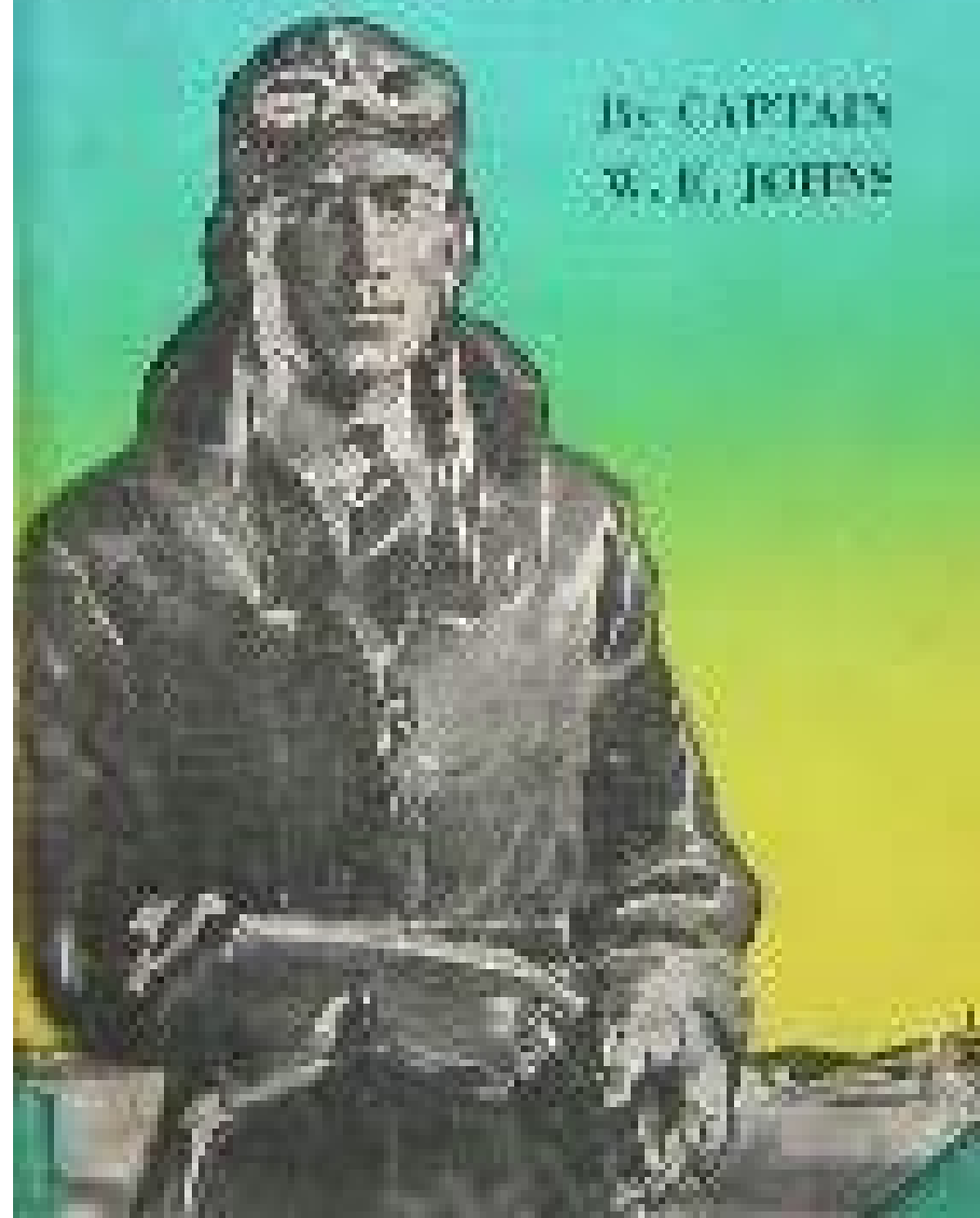


# BIGGLES IN THE SOUTH SEAS

BY CAPTAIN  
W. R. BIGGLES



## THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDS

TAHITI is the largest of the Society Islands, so named by that famous navigator, Captain Cook, after the Royal Society, for which he did much valuable work of exploration and research in the Pacific Ocean—then called the South Sea.

The Marquesas, a group of eleven wild and rugged islands, were so named in 1594 by their Spanish discoverer Mendana, who had been sponsored by Don Garcia Mendoza, Viceroy of Peru. He named them Las Islas Marquesa de Mendoza—or the Islands of the Marquis of Mendoza. Today they are known simply as the Marquesas. The vast collection of coral atolls known as the Paumotus lie about five hundred miles to the south of the Marquesas. They are true 'South Sea Islands'. The native name Paumotu means literally 'a cloud of islands'. Set in a coral sea, they were for many years the dread of mariners, by whom they were named the Dangerous Isles, or, sometimes, the Low Archipelago, on account of the fact that the islands are sometimes only a few feet above the sea at their highest point. During hurricanes, seas have been known to sweep right across them, with appalling loss of life.

It was a perfect morning in early spring, when Major James Bigglesworth, better known to his friends as Biggles, with his two comrades, the Honourable Algernon Lacey, M.C., and 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite, turned into Piccadilly on their way to the Royal Aero Club where they had decided to take lunch. They walked slowly on the Park side of the great thoroughfare, enjoying the sunshine, and it was with some reluctance that they finally crossed over to the Club entrance.

A short, slim, clean-shaven man with bright red hair closely cropped and a somewhat bellicose expression on his sun-tanned face, was standing at the top of the steps smoking a battered briar pipe and gazing reflectively across the greensward opposite. Biggles glanced at him casually, and was about to pass on when he stopped abruptly and swung round, staring hard. 'Great Scott! he exclaimed. 'If it isn't the greatest of all Scots—

Sandy Macaster, the boy himself. And how's Sandy?'

The little man with the red hair snatched his pipe from his mouth. His eyes opened wide.

'Biggles! By the beard of St. Andrew! The one and only Biggles. And

the fair Algernon—none other. What's this—a reunion party?'

‘It begins to look like it, doesn't it?’ smiled Biggles, introducing Ginger. ‘Meet Captain Macaster,’ he said, otherwise known as Sandy. Sandy was in our squadron in France—

until he hit a telegraph pole on the wrong side of the lines. I never heard how you came to do that, Sandy; I don't think we've met since. I have a faint recollection of somebody telling me that you were leading a life of ease and luxury on a South Sea island.’

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‘Then whoever it was he was a liar,’ asserted Sandy promptly. ‘For I've found neither ease nor luxury in the parts I've been travelling.’

‘But what are we standing here for?’ asked Biggles. ‘This seems to be an occasion for celebration. Have you had lunch, Sandy?’

‘No. I was just thinking of going into the Air Force Club for a change.’

‘How about joining us? If we go in right away we can get a table near the window. You can tell me about the prize coconuts you grow—Or is it bananas?’

‘I don't grow coconuts and I hate the sight of them; so would you if you'd had to chew as many as I have,’ muttered Sandy, as they went in through the swing doors and settled themselves at a window table laid for four.

‘What are you doing in England?’ inquired Biggles, as he passed Sandy the menu card. ‘

Are you home on holiday?’

‘Holiday! What's a holiday? I've never heard of it,’ grunted Sandy, passing back the menu card.. ‘I think I'll sink my teeth in a steak if it's all the same to you.’

The others gave their orders and Biggles once more turned to Sandy. ‘Then what brings you home?’ he asked.

‘If you want to know the truth, I'm looking for money.’

‘Then you've, come to a bad place, laddie,’ declared Biggles seriously. ‘There are about nine million people in this burg and they're all doing the same thing—looking for money.’

‘You seem to have found some, anyway,’ suggested Sandy pointedly.

‘Oh, we’ve managed to pick up a little here and there,’ admitted Biggles lightly. ‘If you’re short I can let you have a bit.’

‘A bit’s no use to me, old comrade,’ returned Sandy sadly. ‘I need a tidy wallop—not just a loan, mind you. I’m trying to get a little company together.’

‘What exactly do you mean by a tidy wallop?’ ‘I should need about five thousand pounds.’

Biggles whistled softly. ‘Jumping crocodiles!’ he exclaimed. ‘What do you want to do—

buy a whole island for yourself?’

‘I don’t need an island,’ snorted Sandy. ‘I could have a 6

thousand if that was all I needed. The seas down south are stiff with them; you can just go and help yourself. No, my idea is a wee bit more ambitious than that.’

‘Well, go ahead—maybe we can help.’

Sandy’s face lit up. ‘Ye really think you can put me in the way of finding the cash?’

‘It depends on what you want to do with it, old son. If my memory serves me, some of your ideas in the old days were not exactly what I should call overloaded with sanity. I’m a bit more cautious myself than I used to be, so I’m having nothing to do with any wildcat scheme.’

Sandy set down his knife and fork with studied deliberation. He leaned forward and stared into Biggles’s face. ‘Would ye call a hatful o’ pearls a wild-cat scheme?’ he hissed. Biggles smiled. ‘Come, come, Sandy. Not a hatful.’

‘A hatful I said, and a hatful I mean,’ declared Sandy indignantly. ‘And none of your finicky seed-pearls, either. It’s pearls I mean, pearls the size of peanuts—maybe larger than that.’

‘Well, that sounds marvellous,’ admitted Biggles. He shook his head sadly. ‘But I’m afraid you’re going to have an awful tough job

persuading the stiffnecks in the City of London that these pearls really exist. Have you got any with you?'

'If I had I shouldn't be here,' snorted Sandy. 'But I've seen them.'

'You don't mean that somebody else saw them, and told you about it?'

Sandy set down his tumbler with a bang. His slight Scotch brogue became more pronounced under the strain of his enthusiasm. 'I tell ye, mon, I've seen 'em—wi' me own eyes. Now d'ye understand that?'

Biggles nodded. 'Pardon my scepticism, old sharpshooter—but when you saw 'em, why didn't you slip a few into your hat?'

'For a thundering good reason. Get me a wee drop o' whusky and I'll tell ye the story; then maybe ye'll understand.'

Biggles passed the order to a steward, laid his cigarette-case open on the table, selected a cigarette, and lighted it. 7

'Go ahead, Sandy,' he said. 'I haven't heard a good story in years.'

Ìf ye're no goin' to believe me, then I'm wasting me time a-tellin' ye,' grumbled Sandy.

'You'll stick to facts—no romancing?'

tell ye just the plain sober honest truth—every word of it,' said Sandy emphatically. '

Now, this was the way of it. The person who told you that I was down in the South Seas was right up to that point. I couldn't stick civilization—or maybe civilization couldn't stick me. Anyway, I couldn't get the sort of job I wanted; the people who gave away the sort of job I had in mind had no time for a feller whose sole qualifications were flying and fighting. Ah weel! I should worry. I just sold everything I had—which wasn't much—and bought myself a third-class passage to Papeete, in Tahiti, which is the sort of headquarters of those who live on, or around, the Islands. Honest men and the scum of the seven seas, gentlemen and roughnecks, traders and beachcombers; white men and black men, brown men and yellow men, the odds and ends of every seaport in the world get together sooner or later at Tahiti. On the whole they're a good crowd—but tough, mind ye. You wouldn't expect them to be otherwise. But there are some skunks among them, too—bound to be.' Sandy took a reflective sip of his drink before he continued. 'It's a good spot, Tahiti

—which, incidentally, in case you don't know it, is one of the Society Islands. They belong to France now and, being French, nobody bothers much about anything—you soon get that way in the South Seas. There are a lot of Chinese there: they're all over the Islands these days; but on the whole they're a decent, harmless crowd. The harbour is a fascinating place; all sorts of shipping, mostly schooners for island trading, old and sun-bleached, but tough—like their skippers. Copra, which is dried coconut, is the chief trade, although there is still a fair amount done in shell and pearls. All the pearls that are found around the islands are brought to Papeete, where they are sold to the agents of the Paris jewel firms. But I must get on with my story.

‘Well, I drifted around from one island to another,

sometimes doing supercargo on one of the island

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schooners, sometimes helping a trader to run his store, and sometimes doing nothing at all. The trouble is, you don't have to do anything if you don't want to; you can usually find somebody willing to keep you for the sake of company. If not—well, you can always manage somehow. But I didn't want to stay down there for the rest of my life—

don't get that idea. There were times when I'd have given the whole blessed boiling of islands, pearls, and lagoons complete, for a glimpse of old Scotland on a misty day. I wanted to make a fortune, easily if possible, but I wanted one, anyway, so that I could come home for a bit when I felt like it. There were plenty of fortunes about, but they always just seemed to miss me. More than once I had one almost in my grasp, but it always just slipped out of my reach.'

‘How?’ asked Ginger, who was very interested.

‘How? Oh, I could sit here all day if I started telling you hard-luck stories. But I'll give ye an example. One day I spotted an old diving-suit in a trader's store on one of the Paumotus. He agreed to lend it to me on the understanding that if I found pearls I was to give him a third. That suited me. I went off to a chap I knew who had an old lugger and made the same deal with him. So I had a boat and a diving-suit, and could keep a third of all the pearls I found. I did well. I worked like a nigger for nearly a year, doing most of the diving myself, by which time I had a nice little bag of pearls—enough to keep me comfortably for the rest of my days even with a third share. So I pulled up my mudhook and made for Papeete. The next day a

cyclone hit me. I got ashore at Mareita on a bit of driftwood, with most of the skin burned off my back by the sun. I went to hospital to grow a new hide. The pearls were back where they came from—on the bottom of the sea with the lugger. Another time I was supercargo on a schooner when we found ourselves becalmed near a Marquesan skin-diver,' working with a pal in a canoe. They'd got about thirty big shells, unopened, in the bottom of it. Having nothing better to do than whistle for a wind, I offered them two old pipes and a stick of tobacco for the I SKIN-DIVING. An expression used for diving without a diving-suit; it is confined chiefly to natives, ho work nude except for goggles to protect the eyes. 9

shells. They jumped at it, naturally, for you can open a thousand shells without finding a pearl. In the long run it's shell that makes the money, not pearls; there's always a demand for it. In case you don't know, shell is the source of mother-of-pearl. It's worth from a hundred to four hundred pounds a ton, according to quality. Well, I squatted down on the deck and started to open the oysters, to see what the luck was like. Incidentally, I'd better tell you that the South Sea oyster isn't a little squib like a Whitstable native; it's a big fellow, weighing several pounds. There was nothing in the first one. There was nothing in the second one, either. Presently I had twenty-nine shells opened on the deck and not so much as a seed pearl for my trouble. There was only one shell left, and I hadn'

t much faith in it. It was the smallest of the lot—you always take the biggest first, whatever you are handling, even if it is only a plate of shrimps. Well, I cut the shell open and ran my fingers through the muck inside. There was something there. I thought it couldn't be a pearl because it was too big. It was about the size of a thrush's egg. I took it out. It was a pearl, such a pearl as you never saw in all your life. There it lay on the deck, gleaming with all the iridescent fire that a pearl has when it first comes out of the sea, and is still wet. In Paris it would be worth maybe five thousand pounds. It was the loveliest thing you ever saw in your life, with just a faint tint of rose in it. I couldn't believe my eyes. I just sat there blinking at it like an owl, sort of dazed and limp. At that precise instant a slant of wind hit the schooner. She heeled over. I went over. So did the pearl—into the sea. I let out a yell as it rolled gleaming across the deck, and flung myself after it. I grabbed—just a tenth of a second too late. My fingers hit the deck not more than an inch behind it. Lying there I could see it going down into the blue depths like a little white electric light. I tell you, I nearly howled. But it was gone. After that I began to think that there was something in the old saying about pearls bringing bad luck, and sooner or later going back where they came from. My trouble was, the

pearls always went back before I could sell them. But let me get on with the real story. About eighteen months ago I was flat broke, so I took

a job as supercargo with a fellow named Louis Castanelli, 10

a dirty little Corsican. He had got a bad name—oh, I knew all about that. You soon get to know about people in the Islands. But I'd no choice. As I say, I was broke. Nothing else was available, and he was just off round the Marquesas and the Paumotus in his schooner, the Avarata, a dirty tub with cockroaches and copra-bugs squinting at you out of every crack in her warped deck. I'll tell you about these tropical cockroaches one day—they'll eat the soles off your feet if you don't watch out. Well, we set sail in Papeete Harbour, and off we went for a cruise that might last from six to nine months.

Castanelli was even worse than I expected. He's a crooked, foul-mouthed little swine, and his crew of eight native boys, whom he'd picked up some time in the Solomons, were not much better. Maybe that's why he selected them. As a rule the native boys are good—anyway, the Tahitians, Marquesans, and Paumotuans. But those with Castanelli were a bad lot. I heard later that they'd all done time in Australia for cannibalism—and that didn't surprise me. I knew I was in for a rough trip, but if I'd known how bad it was going to be I'd have stayed on the beach at Tahiti. Not until we were at sea did I discover how much booze Castanelli had below. I knew he couldn't drink it all, so I guessed what it was for. It was his "trade" stock. Now selling spirits to natives is against the law, and quite right, too. Unfortunately, knowing no better, the natives will always buy it, so crooked traders get round the law by all sorts of dodges—putting brandy up in scentbottles, for instance. The stuff is traded as perfume, or hair oil—but the natives put it inside, not outside. I spoke to Castanelli about it and he admitted it. He didn't bother about camouflage like scent-bottles. He sold the stuff straight. I told him that I didn't agree with that sort of business. We had a row, at the end of which I threatened—

foolishly, perhaps—to report him to the first French governor I saw. I say it was foolish, because, knowing Castanelli, I might have reckoned that he'd take steps to see that I never got near the authorities.

Well, we went on, me keeping to myself and Castanelli drinking-most of the day with his gang of Solomon Island cut-throats. You might ask me how we got anywhere in such circumstances. The answer is, drunk or sober, Casl 1



tanelli's boys were good sailors. All the Island boys are like that. They can weather a big sea in a canoe, and make a landfall two thousand miles away without a compass—and that's no lie. First we worked round the Paumotus, which is a long chain of low-lying coral atolls, sometimes called the Low Archipelago; the old navigators used to call them the Dangerous Isles, which was a good name, because navigation there is as tricky as anywhere in the world. We went on towards the Marquesas, which are an entirely different proposition, being volcanic rock covered with jungle. Scientists reckon that the islands are the tops of the mountains of a sunken continent, and that's just what they look like. They're all jumbled up with mountains thousands of feet high—some of them are pretty big, too—but I must get on with the story.

Now the two groups of islands may look close together on the map—and so they are, comparatively speaking. But they're over five hundred miles apart—not very much when you're in the South Seas, because distances there bear no relation to distances at home. It'

s all on a much bigger scale. The Pacific is a big place, don't forget, and you can sail before a wind for six thousand miles without seeing so much as a reef. Now it happened that we had got a bit to the east of the Marquesas on account of making the most of a useful breeze, but we were beating up towards them when we made out an island which even Castanelli said he didn't know—and he reckons to know every reef and atoll between the Galapagos and the Ladrões. Not that we paid much attention to that. There are islands everywhere, in the Pacific, and if you called at 'em all you wouldn't get anywhere. We shouldn't have called at this one, anyway, because it was pretty certain that there was nobody on it. And this is where the story really begins—and where my life nearly ended.

Castanelli had been drinking for days, so I'd got into the habit of taking the ship's position. I'm certain that when we passed that island Castanelli didn't know where we were to within five hundred miles. That's important—you'll see why presently. The sea was flat calm, but there was a swell. There nearly always is a swell in the Pacific, but it may be so big that you don't see it. It was midday, and blinding hot. The island, an atoll, had drifted away

astern. I had taken our position and put the sextant down near the wheel, in case Castanelli sobered up and decided to check my readings. Making a mental note of our longitude and latitude, and

thinking that I'd enter it up in the log later on, I lay down on the deck and stared down into the sea, waiting for a wind. And there I lay, staring down into the blue water, thinking about Castanelli, and myself—anything. And it was while I was lying there like that I saw something that shook me from my Adam's apple to my insteps. The bottom of the sea—where there hadn't been any bottom, you understand—

suddenly came up. It came up to within five or six feet of our keel, hung there for a moment or two, and then slowly sank down out of sight again. You won't argue with me when I say that I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought that the sun had got me at last. But I lay there staring, waiting to see if it happened again. It did. Everything was quiet. There was no perceptible movement. Then suddenly I realized what was happening. The bottom of the sea wasn't moving, of course. It was the schooner. Although you couldn't see it, the Avarata was rising and falling on a forty or fifty foot swell. As she came up, the sea bottom disappeared. As she went down, the coral came up to meet us. No wonder I was shaken, for we were in shallow water. If the swell got any worse we should come down on the coral with a crash that would crumple us up like a busted eggshell. I let out a yell. Of course, I had no means of knowing how far the shallow water ran. We might have been simply drifting over the top of a submerged peak. I didn't know. I still don't know. But it was clear that we couldn't stay there. It meant manning the longboat and towing the Avarata clear—and quickly.

My yell brought up Castanelli at a run—and the boys. They were not so drunk as I thought they were. I shouted "Man the boat!" Castanelli wanted to know what the blankety-blank for—and well he might. I told him to come and look. We all stood there staring. The bottom of the sea came up, a marvellous sight, blue, red, green, and purple coral, like—well, you'd have to see it to understand. But there wasn't only coral. There was something else. Shell! Thousands of oysters, the size of dinner-plates, lying in pairs—because the oysters were open. They open to eat,

and when they do that you can see the gleam of the mother-of-pearl inside. The whole floor of the sea was covered with gleaming disks of shell, lying flat or sticking out of the coral like big swallows' nests. I felt myself go weak as I realized that in shell alone I was looking at a fortune. It was the sort of thing the old hands dream about. And that very fact warned me to glance at Castanelli. It was a good thing I did.

I was only just in time. There was such a look on his face as I hope never to see on any man's face again—and his hand was in his side pocket where I knew he kept his gun. "I reckon there ain't enough here for the two of us," he said, with an ugly grin. I jumped aside just as he fired. The shot missed me.

`Now just imagine my position. We were in the middle of the Pacific, in water crawling with sharks. Castanelli had a gun and was bent on murder. I wasn't even armed. His eight boys were with him, their knives out. I couldn't run. I couldn't hide. There was nowhere on the ship where I could take cover without being shot full of holes. You won't find it hard to believe that I told myself my number was up. But I had one card left to play. If I couldn't get the pearls, then I would see to it that Castanelli shouldn't—that is, if he didn't know where\_ we were. As I told you, I'd noted our position although I hadn't entered it up in the log. The sextant was still standing by the wheel where I had put it down. If I could reach it before he plugged me it should go over the side, for without it he would have no means of ascertaining where we were. I made a dash for it. He fired, but missed again. I fairly yelled with joy as I snatched up the instrument and heaved it over the rail. Castanelli fired again, but at that moment by the grace of God a squall hit the schooner. I fell. So did Castanelli. But the gang, with their knives in their hands, were at me. I decided that I'd rather drown than be carved into slices, so over the side I went, and swam for all I was worth. What with the way now on the schooner, and me swimming, by the time Castanelli had got to the rail I was too far away for accurate shooting. He kept on firing, of course, but although some of the shots splashed the water over me, not one hit me.

But he wasn't going to let me get away—not if he could

prevent it. I saw the boys making sail, and round they came 14

at me. But the wind was now blowing half a gale. You get squalls like that in the Pacific. Twice they brought the schooner past me, but what with me ducking and diving, and the schooner rolling, Castanelli's shooting was all over the place. Pretty soon he had to pack up chasing me and keep his head into the wind, or he'd have capsized his schooner. Now, I thought, as it drew farther away from me, I'll just drown comfortably by myself. You see, it wasn't much use hoping. What could I hope for? Imagine it. Out in the middle of the Pacific, no land in sight, sharks in the water, and a gale blowing up. Not so good, eh?'

`Pretty grim,' admitted Biggles.

'You're right, that's just what it was,' declared Sandy, taking another sip at his drink. 'I hadn't even a hen-coop to hang on to, as most people seem to have in a shipwreck,' he went on. 'But there was this about it: the water was warm. It always is down there, and if you can keep afloat, and the sharks leave you alone, you can hang on for hours. I soon stopped swimming. I kicked off my clothes and floated, keeping an eye open for dorsal fins. I saw one or two, but apparently they weren't man-eaters—they're not all killers, you know. The schooner disappeared over the horizon and I was all alone on the rolling deep—a position in which I hope never to find myself again. Night came. The squall passed. The sea began to go down, and I was still floating. Presently I began to wonder why I troubled to float; it was only prolonging things. However, it's funny how you hang on to life, even when everything seems hopeless. I couldn't hope to be picked up. In those waters there is, maybe, one ship for every hundred thousand square miles of sea, so to expect one to come my way at that moment was to expect too much. Years might pass before one came along. But my luck was in, for all that. I might have got into a current running to the North Pole, or to South America, instead of which I struck one running towards the island we had passed. I saw it at dawn, quite close. It lay so low, and I was so low in the water, that I could only see the tops of the palms; they appeared to be growing out of the water, but I knew that where they were there was land, and I struck out towards them. Funnily enough, having resigned myself to my fate I had ceased to worry; but now that I had a chance I got frightened again, terrified that the palms might slide past without my being able to reach them after all. I just made it, although the surf nearly finished me. I shan't forget those last ten minutes. Nearly every atoll has a reef round it. The lagoon is inside. But it isn't always possible to get to the lagoon, because once in a while there is no opening through the reef. You'd have to see the conk bers breaking on a South Sea reef to understand what they're like. If ever there was a case of an irresistible force meeting an immovable mass, that's it. A wave of a hundred thousand tons of water comes roaring along, majestic, invincible. You'd think that nothing could stop it. Then the coral grabs at the bottom of it and tears its foundations away. The mountain of water hangs - for a minute in mid-air, and then crashes down with a noise like thunder. It spreads itself out into a boiling sea of foam, like white lace; then it rolls back, and there is the reef waiting for the next wave. And so it goes on year after year. Occasionally the sea seems to go mad and hurls its entire fury on the coral. That's when a hurricane comes along. I hope you never get caught in one. A man or a boat caught in the surf would be smashed to pulp. Well, I kept on swimming until I found a gap in the reef. The

sea picked me up and flung me through—just in time, for a shark was very interested in me and had been keeping me company for some minutes. I finished up like a piece of wet rag on the beach.'

'Was anybody there?' asked Ginger, quickly. He had followed Sandy's story with intense interest.

'There was not,' replied Sandy. 'Robinson Crusoe's island was a hive of industry compared with mine. He did at least find a footprint on the beach. I found nothing except sea-shells and coconuts. My great fear was that there would be no fresh water. Fortunately there was; there usually is, although where it comes from in the middle of so much salt is a question I can't answer. So I had a drink, nibbled a coconut, and staggered around the new establishment to see what I'd struck. It was very pretty, there's no doubt of that; the lagoon was something to make you gasp; but I wasn't concerned with beauty. For let me tell you this: Robinson Crusoe stuff may be all very nice to read about, but when you find yourself fixed that way it gives

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you a funny sort of weak feeling in the tummy. The more I realized that I was likely to spend the rest of my days by myself, the less I liked it. You see, knowing about the pearls, for the first time in years I had a real object in living. I kept a weather eye open for Castanelli's schooner, in case he came back; but I never saw him again, which leads me to think that I was right in assuming that he didn't know where we were when he tried to kill me. Otherwise he would certainly have been back for the pearls.'

'How long were you there?' asked Ginger.

Only three months. Oh, I was, lucky, there's no doubt o' that. I was taken off by a couple of Marquesans from Rutuona in a canoe; a boy and a girl named Breaker of Shells and Full Moon—at least, those are the English equivalents. They are easier to remember than the native names. They had been out fishing for albicore, got caught in a squall and carried out to sea—not that it worried them much. That sort of thing is always happening to them. They are as much at home on the sea as on land. They can swim as soon as they can walk, so always being used to the water they have no fear of it. Anyhow, they spotted my island and came ashore for a few fresh nuts. Instead, they found me. They thought it was no end of a joke. I was certainly glad to see them. They took me back to Rutuona with them.

It took me two months, hopping from island to island in a canoe, to get to Nuka-hiva, the biggest island of the group, where I had to wait another three months before Pierre Loubert came along in his schooner and took me to Tahiti. I found that Castanelli had been back and gone off again, having reported me as lost overboard in a gale. From the fact that he went off again so soon, I fancy that he went to look for the pearl-bed—as he was bound to. What man wouldn't, with a fortune waiting to be picked up? But without knowing the exact position he might as well look for a particular grain of sand on a beach. I knew where the bed was, of course, and I'd have told him if the fool hadn't tried to kill me. There was just a chance that he might find the island if he looked long enough, but even that would be a tall order.

‘The end of the story is that I tried to get one-of the

island skippers interested in my find, offering to go fifty17

fifty. But there was nothing doing. You see,—the trouble is that every loafer and beachcomber in the South Seas has a tale to tell about a wonderful pearl-bed. You are always hearing such stories, but nobody believes them. They just laugh at you. And to tell the honest truth, if I hadn't seen the pearls with my own eyes I should have laughed at any one who tried to pitch me a yarn like that. There were plenty of such beds years ago, but they've all been worked out—at least, that's what people think. I've picked up a small pearl or two on Rutuona; the natives made me a present of them when I left; they enabled me to get a little money; but not enough to fit out an expedition of my own, with diving-gear, which I should need, because with that weight of water going up and down it would be too dangerous for skin-diving. The boys would be willing to try, no doubt, but it wouldn't be fair to ask them, although a good Paumotuan will go down over a hundred feet and think nothing of it. The only thing left to do was to go to Australia to see if I could raise the money there. I was afraid Castanelli would come back to Tahiti, and if we met face to face one of us was likely to get killed and the other arrested for murder. But it was just the same in Australia. One or two people were Mildly interested, but they wanted to know too much. They wouldn't put down the money without my telling them where the pearl-bed was, and that was something I wasn't prepared to do. I had just enough money left to bring me back to England, where I thought people might not be so sceptical but

`You haven't succeeded?' murmured Biggles.

`No.'

`Frankly, I don't think you will. I'm afraid the proposition is too much of a gamble for most people.'

`Gamble!' cried Sandy, angrily. 'It's no gamble. I could go straight to the spot.'

Biggles took out his notebook and pencil. 'How far is it from Tahiti to your island—what'

s the name of it, by the way?'

It hasn't a name as far as I can make out.'

All right. For the sake of argument we'll call it Sandy's Island. How far is it from Tahiti?'

`Getting on for eight hundred miles.'

And the lagoon? Is it a safe anchorage?'

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As safe as anything in the South Seas.'

`Could you land a flying-boat there?'

`You're not thinking of flying?'

`Why not?'

ndy scratched his head. 'No reason, I suppose. I've just never thought of it that way. It would probably be more expensive than using a schooner.'

'It would be quicker.'

It would certainly be that.'

`Could we dive from a flying-boat?'

`Certainly—in calm weather, of course.'

`You've done some diving?'

‘Plenty.’

‘You'd know all about the sort of kit to get?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then if we provided the flying-boat and paid all expenses, would you be willing to split the profits?’

‘Would I? You bet I would!’ cried Sandy, enthusiastically. ‘You provide the equipment; I'll provide the pearls, and we'll split the profits four ways. How's that?’

‘Suits us,’ agreed Biggles, without hesitation, glancing at Algy and Ginger in turn.

‘When would you be ready to start?’ asked Sandy.

‘Just as soon as we can get the equipment together. I'll give you a cheque. You go off and see about the diving-gear, and anything else you think we might need—but keep the weight down as far as you can. I'll attend to the machine.’

Sandy swallowed the rest of his drink at a gulp. ‘Im on my way,’ he declared. ‘The pearls are as good as ours.’ ‘Don't forget to bring your bowler hat to measure them in,’ smiled Biggles. ‘We shall be satisfied with nothing less than the hatful you spoke about at the beginning.’

ALTHOUGH they did not waste a single day, it was nearly two months before the expedition arrived at its first temporary base in the South Pacific; for not until Biggles had examined the situation closely did any of them realize the difficulties involved in getting an aircraft to the Islands. In the first place there were papers to arrange, although this was fairly simple compared with the business of getting the machine where they wanted it. And there was, of course, the matter of the selection of the ideal type of aircraft.

Now there are two ways of getting an aeroplane to a given destination; it can be shipped there or it can be flown under its own power. Contrary to general belief, in the case of a distant destination it is less expensive to ship a machine than fly it, for which reason new machines destined for Australia from Great Britain or America usually arrive on board ship. Naturally, this is not the case with specially organized flights, or the regular air lines.

The machine chosen for the arduous duties that would be required of



it was a 'Scud' twinengined flying-boat, a high-wing monoplane with long-range tanks that had been built for a company proposing to operate a coastal service round Great Britain. The company, however, had failed financially, and the machine was put on the market. Biggles snapped it up cheaply, a most satisfactory bargain considering that it suited their purpose admirably.

It was at this juncture, when ways and means of getting the machine to the South Seas were under discussion, that Sandy, having bought such equipment as he considered necessary, suggested that it might be a good thing if he went on ahead and made such arrangements as now appeared not only desirable but imperative. He pointed out that the arrival at Tahiti of an aircraft the size of the flying-boat 20

could hardly fail to create a sensation, a state of affairs that it would be better to avoid if possible. He proposed, therefore, to cable an agent in Australia to forward a supply of petrol and oil to the British island of Raratonga, which is on the main shipping line to Australia. He would go direct to Raratonga, and leaving a supply of petrol and oil for the machine when it arrived, would arrange for the transport of the rest by sea to Vaitie, one of the smaller of the Cooke islands, which had a large, almost landlocked lagoon that would make a perfect anchorage for the machine while it was being refuelled, after it had been flown up from Raratonga. At Vaitie the machine would pick him up, with the fuel, and go on in a single straight flight to Sandy's Island. These arrangements were made to prevent unnecessarily long overseas flights, involving risks which were better avoided. This plan was adopted, more for the reason that it was the best one so far suggested than because it was ideal. In Biggles's opinion it was far from ideal, but for want of a better one he accepted it. The 'Scud' was therefore put on board an Australia-bound steamer calling at Raratonga, and Biggles, Algy, and Ginger travelled with it. Sandy had departed for Raratonga immediately on the approval of his plan, taking the stores and equipment with him, so that when the others arrived there nearly a month later they found that, in accordance with the programme, he had already departed for Vaitie, having chartered a native lugger for the purpose. He had, of course, left a supply of fuel and oil at Raratonga, more than enough to enable the machine to fly to Vaitie. A week of hard work had been required to put the machine in an airworthy condition, so that when it arrived at Vaitie it carried three rather weary airmen, who were not in the least pleased to discover that Sandy had been involved in a mishap which seriously affected their schedule. He was there, as was the petrol and equipment, but his arm was in a sling; and the story he told, apologetically, was this. He had arrived at Vaitie, which was

uninhabited, well ahead of time, and learning that the native skipper of the lugger, a Polynesian named Namu, was going on to Tahiti on business, and would call at Vaitie again for fresh water on the way back, he thought it would be a good plan 21

if he went along with him—having nothing more to do— and pick up such news as he might, particularly anything concerning Castanelli. The point was—and in this the others agreed—that there had been a long delay in which there was just a chance that Castanelli had discovered the pearl-bed. If that was so, the news would certainly have got back to Tahiti. So Sandy had gone. One of the very first people he had seen on stepping ashore at Tahiti was Castanelli himself. Before he could get back to the boat trouble had been caused—deliberately, of course—by Castanelli's Solomon Island boys, and although he had tried to avoid it, in the melee he had been stabbed in the arm. Naturally, he had been tempted to report the matter to the governor of the island, but, realizing the danger in which he stood, he had gone straight back to the boat and persuaded Namu to return to Vaitie. He had got back to Vaitie all right, but he was still incapacitated by his arm. He had only just got back. Namu and his lugger were still there. That, briefly, was Sandy's story.

Biggles examined the wound and saw at a glance that Sandy was not fit to travel, nor would he be for the next ten days. The gash was an ugly one and looked inflamed, while Sandy himself was feverish. To go on in such circumstances was to court trouble, for wounds heal slowly in the tropics, and should it turn out that medical attention became necessary, the expedition would have to be abandoned at the very outset of operations. Rather than risk this Biggles resolved to delay the final journey to Sandy's island until it was clear that the wound was healing satisfactorily.. It was an unfortunate beginning but it could not be helped.

Instead of doing nothing while they were waiting, Biggles suggested that, as the lugger was still at Vaitie, two of them might go to Tahiti to pick up any news that might affect the expedition—assuming, of course, that the Polynesian was willing to make the journey for a monetary consideration. He would not use the aircraft for fear of attracting undesirable publicity to themselves in Tahiti. The weakness of Sandy's scheme had been that he was known to Castanelli, but this need no longer apply. And so it came about that the night following their arrival at Vaitie saw Biggles and Ginger on the lugger bound for Papeete Harbour, Tahiti. Algy had been left behind to look after Sandy, but 22

with instructions to risk the consequences and fly him to Tahiti should the wound become worse.

Three days on the open sea in a small boat was a new experience for Ginger; he was rather nervous at first, particularly when sharks kept them company, as they often did. However, fair weather and a favourable breeze prevailed, and they sailed unobtrusively into the famous island harbour of Papeete on the evening of the third day. Ginger was breathless at the tropical beauty of the coastal scenery as they sailed along it, and as soon as they were ashore he would have explored it further. But Biggles pointed out that they were not visiting the island for pleasure, and declared his intention of returning to Vaitie as soon as their inquiries were complete. Ginger took what consolation he could from the fact that there would be plenty of time for exploration when they got to Sandy's Island. With the object of pursuing the inquiries forthwith, Biggles directed his steps towards the Restaurant du Port, as Sandy had advised. It was nearly full, and Ginger gazed at the extraordinary assortment of humanity it held with fascinated interest. There were a few well-dressed tourists, mostly Americans, brawny island skippers, bearded down-at-heel white men of many nationalities, half-castes of every shade between black and yellow, Chinese traders, and good-looking Polynesians, some with hibiscus or other tropical blossoms tucked behind their ears or into their hair. Odd words of English, French, German, and unknown languages reached Ginger as he followed Biggles across the room.

Biggles found two seats in a corner and ordered some food. 'It's rather hard to know where to start making inquiries,' he said, above the babble of conversation. Namu said he would come along if he could manage it, after he has finished some business he has to attend to. I hope he does. I think he could help us.'

'You haven't told him anything about Castanelli?'

'No, but he knows that in some way we are concerned with him. Apparently he was with Sandy when he got knifed in the arm, and although Sandy didn't tell him any details, he no doubt drew certain conclusions. In any case,

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he probably overheard enough scraps of our conversation at Vaitie to give him an idea of how the wind blows.'

Ginger had taken a liking to the big, athletic, open-faced Polynesian

skipper, and he said so. 'I think we might have done better had we taken him into our confidence,' he murmured 'He would be better able to deal with this situation than us. He must hear all sorts of gossip. Ah! here he is, coming in now.'

Ginger noticed that more than one pair of curious eyes followed the Polynesian across the room as he walked straight over to the table where Biggles and he were sitting. He pulled out a chair and sat down. 'You look for Capitan. Castanelli, peut-etre?' he said softly, in an odd mixture of English and French.

Biggles regarded him thoughtfully for a moment without answering. Then he nodded. '

Yes, we are interested in Castanelli,' he said.

'Bad man.'

'So I believe.'

'Tres mauvais. Be on your guard.'

'Why? Do you know of any reason why he should have anything against us? He doesn't even know us.'

'That one make trouble with everybody. He make trouble yesterday. He pull out in the morning.'

'You mean—he's in Papeete now?'

'Yes. His schooner Avatara is down in harbour. He back from Rutuona. He sail at dawn. Him plenty stores on board now.'

'What was the trouble?'

'He steal boy from Rutuona. Yesterday boy get ashore here and run away. Castanelli catch him and beat him pretty hard. Say he signed on for voyage and try to desert. Haul him back.'

'You say he is sailing in the morning?'

'Yes, Governor tell him to clear out.'

'Where is he going?'

'He not say. Nobody knows except Castanelli and his boys. They wink and grin when anybody ask.'

`How did you learn all this?'

`My boys talk on waterfront—plenty gossip.'

`But what happened about the boy Castanelli stole from Rutuona? Has he still got him?'

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The Polynesian shook his head. 'Fraid he have to go with Castanelli. Every one afraid of Castanelli.' Even the Governor?'

`Maybe. Castanelli make much trouble.'

`But that's a scandalous thing,' cried Ginger, indignantly. 'I savvy bymeby that boy ShellBreaker he jump overboard.'

Ginger stared at the name. Biggles frowned and stared into Namu's face. 'What name did you say?' he asked, tensely.

`Shell-Breaker.'

`You mean—the boy Castanelli took from Rutuona?' `Yes.'

In a flash Biggles understood. Castanelli had been to Rutuona. In some way he had learnt that Shell-Breaker had picked up Sandy, and must therefore know the approximate position of the island. Now, with the boy and stores on board, he was going in search of it.

'I think it's a good thing we came here,' Biggles told Ginger grimly. 'That's as much as we want to know. We'd better get back to Vaitie right away.' He glanced over his shoulder to ascertain the cause of a disturbance that had started near the door. A sudden silence fell. All eyes were on a short, thick-set man, with an Italian cast of countenance, who was advancing slowly down the room. His smooth, swarthy face was flushed, his eyes were half closed, and from the way he fingered his sleek black moustache he was evidently enjoying the mild sensation his appearance had created. Namu had half risen to his feet, but he dropped back again into his seat and touched Biggles on the arm. 'Castanelli,' he whispered nervously.

`What about it?' asked Biggles. 'You've nothing to be afraid of, have you?'

`Maybe you not understand. If Castanelli go for me I do nothing.'

`Why not?'

`Castanelli white man. Me hit Castanelli I get into bad trouble.'

Àh, I understand,' nodded Biggles, counting out some change to pay the bill. He looked up, however, as out of the corners of his eyes he saw that the Corsican had halted at their table. He was looking down at Namu with an expression of sinister animosity.

`What for you go sneaking round my schooner—eh, you scum?' he grated. 'I no go near your schooner, Capitan Castanelli,' answered Namu quickly. The corners of Castanelli's mouth came down in an ugly snarl. He drew back his fist. '

You lying ' He broke off and stared belligerently at Biggles who had risen swiftly to his feet.

`Just a minute,' snapped Biggles. 'This is my party. I don't remember inviting you.'

There was dead silence in the room.

Castanet glared at Biggles. 'You seet down,' he gritted viciously.

`Who do you think you are talking to—one of your boys?' asked Biggles, curtly.

`Get out of my way.'

`What do you think you are going to do?'

`Pulp zis nigger.'

Biggles shook his head. 'Oh, no, you're not,' he said evenly. 'If there's any pulping to be done I'll take a hand.'

Castanelli's eyes opened wide. `Do you know who I am?' he snarled, in a voice that was evidently intended to intimidate.

`Yes, I know who you are and what you are,' returned Biggles evenly. 'Your name's Castanelli, and you're just a cheap bully who thinks he owns the Islands. Now get away from my table.'

Castanelli's arm moved like lightning. His hand flashed to his pocket. It came up with a knife in it.

Biggles snatched up a glass of ice water from the table and flung it in his face. He took a swift pace forward. His left jabbed Castanelli in the solar plexus, and, as the Corsican's head jerked forward under the

blow, Biggles's right fist hooked his jaw with a crack that sounded as if some one had broken a cricket stump across the middle. Castanelli grunted, staggered, and went over backwards, taking with him a table at which a young American tourist had been sitting. The American jumped aside in the 27

nick of time. 'Oh, boy, oh, boy!' he breathed. 'What a beauty!'

Nobody else in the room moved. The proprietor stood nervously wringing his hands, but made no attempt to interfere. Biggles remained where he was, watching Castanelli slowly pick himself up.

The Corsican clambered to his feet and shook his head. His little eyes, glinting with hate, flashed round the room . at the witnesses of his discomfiture. They came to rest on Biggles. For a moment he hesitated, breathing heavily. 'I shall see you again some time,'

he hissed through his teeth.

'Wait for a dark night when I'm looking the other way, eh?' sneered Biggles. 'You crooked little swine! Go and get on with your work of trading liquor round the islands.'

Castanelli glanced again round the room. Several people were smiling, but their smiles faded quickly when the Corsican's eyes came to rest on them. Castanelli slowly put his knife away, walked quietly to the door, and disappeared into the darkness. Instantly a babble of voices broke out.

'Time somebody handed him that,' declared a down-at-heel beachcomber in a dirty cotton jacket with no collar or tie.

'Then why didn't you do it?' asked Biggles, coldly. 'You look as if you've had plenty of time.' He turned to the others. 'Come on,' he said. 'Finish your drinks and let's go.'

While he was waiting for them a tall fair-haired man, obviously a Scandinavian, in a well-worn skipper's uniform, came across and held out his hand. 'I'm Sven Orlaffsen,' he said. 'Good work, boy. I own the Caramayo. If I can do anything at any time just let me know.'

'Thanks, Orlaffsen,' returned Biggles. 'I'll bear it in mind.' He turned and walked towards the door, watched by every one in the room. 'Have you finished your business?' he asked Namu as soon as they were outside.

`Yes, boss. I've finished.'

`Ready to sail?'

`When you say.'

`Good. I'm going to find the Governor and ask him to

inquire into this business of Shell-Breaker,' declared

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Biggles. 'We've got to get that boy out of Castanelli's hands.'

Namu was staring across the moonlit harbour. 'It's too late,' he said.

`Why—what do you mean?'

Castanelli make sail. There go his schooner.' Namu pointed. Following the direction indicated, Biggles saw a schooner moving slowly towards the harbour mouth. Water still dripped from her anchor. 'He didn't waste much time, did he?'

he said bitterly. 'I'm afraid we can't do anything about it now. But I have a feeling we shall meet that gentleman again. We'd better get back

Vaitie.'

They began walking towards where the lugger was moored.

ON their arrival at Vaitie they found Sandy's arm much improved, but he was definitely alarmed by their news that Castanelli had got hold of Shell-Breaker. 'I can tell you what happened,' he declared furiously. 'Castanelli was cruising about looking for the shell-bed and put in at Rutuona for fresh water. He would be bound to put in there because it is one of the biggest islands in the group, and at the same time the one nearest to the area where I went overboard. The natives must have told him that I had been there; you can't blame them for that. Very little happens on the Islands, and my staying there would

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be regarded as a first-class piece of news. Naturally, Castanelli would make inquiries and so find out the names of the boy and girl who picked me up. He was too wise to lay hands on the girl; white men have lost their heads for less—even in recent years; but he got hold of



young Shell-Breaker and carried him away. His stores were probably low, so he came back to Tahiti to refit before going on to the pearl-bed. I'll bet you any money that is what happened.'

Namu, who had been listening to the conversation, nodded. 'Yes, he brings plenty stores, and new diving-suit,' he said.

'How do you know he's got a diving-suit?' asked. Sandy sharply. 'I sell my copra to Sing Hoo. I know Sing Hoo has diving-gear. When I go this time, no diving-suit. I say, "Where diving-suit?" Sing Hoo say, "Castanelli buy it."

'Well, that's plain enough,' declared Biggles. 'We needn't argue about it. It looks as if we'

do better get along right away; we can still get there before Castanelli.'

'All the same, it's a pity he's got that boy with him,' muttered Sandy with a worried frown. 'It depends on how much the boy has told him,' returned Biggles. 'I suppose he'd tell everything?'

'I'm not so sure of that. Marquesans can be a funny lot. Their fathers were cannibals, don'

they forget; in fact, there are still whispers of cannibalism. If they like a white man they'll do anything for him; if not, you could cut them to pieces before they'd speak. Shell-Breaker might have told the truth, but on the other hand he might have led Castanelli up the garden path.'

Castanelli call at Rutuona on the way to your island, assuming that the boy has told him where it is?' asked Biggles.

'Bound to. It's a long run to the island. He'll want fresh water. His boys will want fresh nuts.'

'Then how about going on to Rutuona and waiting for him to turn up? If the natives would help we might make him give up Shell-Breaker,' suggested Ginger. 'We could still get to the island first.'

'There's something in that,' declared Sandy. 'By this time Castanelli will be thinking that he's got clear away. The 30

last thing he'll think of is that we've got an aircraft, and that we might get to Rutuona first.'

At any rate, it's worth trying,' decided Biggles. 'We'll get to Rutuona for a start, and see how the land lies. We'll leave the final decision until then.'

The 'Scud' floated on the placid lagoon ready for an immediate take-off. What petrol and stores were not immediately required had already been hidden by Algy while the others were away, so as it was still forenoon there was nothing to delay their departure. After thanking him for his assistance, they said good-bye to Namu and his crew of three grinning boys, and took their places in the machine. The engines were started, and in a few minutes her keel was cutting a creamy wake across the limpid surface of the blue water. Biggles was at the joystick, with the chart and a compass-course pinned on the side of the instrument-board.

For hours they flew on at a comfortable cruising speed over an illimitable expanse of sea, sometimes passing an island which looked like an emerald lying on blue velvet. On one occasion they flew high over a tiny black speck which Sandy declared was a native canoe. Late in the afternoon he pointed to a spot on the horizon. 'Schooner!' he shouted.

That must be Castanelli.'

Not long afterwards a faint blur appeared ahead. Sandy had already announced that they were approaching Rutuona, a fact which he was able to deduce, he said, by the colour of the sky in that direction; instead of the customary deep blue it held a suspicion of reflected green. That he was correct was soon made manifest when the distant blur crystallized into a line of jagged peaks.

'That isn't my idea of a South Sea island,' stated Ginger, as they drew nearer.

'The Marquesas are not South Sea islands in the generally accepted sense of the word,'

Sandy told him. 'Most islands are coral formations, and lie low, like the Paumotos. The Marquesas are a wee bit terrifying at first; some of them stick straight up out of the sea for a thousand feet or more. But most of them have good beaches, although they run up to wild crags in the interior, which, for the most part, is a mass of jungle.'

'Any snakes?' asked Ginger. 'They're my pet aversion.' 31

'No, but there are some nasty ten-inch centipedes that you'll do well

to leave alone. In fact, you'd better not touch anything until we've had a stroll round. I'll show you what to leave alone.'

By this time the machine was gliding down, and Sandy went forward to show Biggles where to land. 'There's the village,' he said, pointing to a few palm-thatched shacks on the edge of a bay. 'There's another village on the far side of the island, but it doesn't amount to much; this is the centre of the island's social life. You can come down anywhere in the bay; there are no rocks or anything, but keep an eye open for canoes.'

Biggles circled slowly round the village, losing height, and then dropped the nose of the machine towards the blue bay, which was bounded on one side by a long, curving strip of golden beach.

Ginger regarded the scene through a side window, spellbound with delight. 'What a paradise! ' was all he could say.

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'Yes, I reckon it's as near Paradise as anywhere on earth,' agreed Sandy. 'But like every paradise, there are serpents.'

'Serpents?' queried Ginger. 'You said—'

'Losh, I'm not thinking of snakes,' declared Sandy. 'It's a bit hard to explain,' he went on.

'Nature is seldom prodigal without throwing in a snag or two. Breadfruit and bananas grow on those hills—but so do poisons. There are orchids in the woods—and there are also sandflies, which bite like fury and leave a spot of blood where they bite. There are pearls in the sea, but there are also sharks, and other unpleasant things. Living coral is one of the loveliest things in the world, but don't scratch yourself on it, or you may be poisoned. And on top of all that, there's sickness. A hundred years ago there were more than ten thousand people on this island; now there aren't more than two hundred. The rest have died from the diseases white men have brought, like consumption, or from leprosy brought by the Chinese. A few more years, and all the natives will be gone; a tragedy, for they are just big lovable children. The curse of it is they know they're dying, and they don't care. They'll hardly bother to pick the breadfruit and coconuts. But don't let's talk about it.'

By this time the 'Scud' was on the water, taxi-ing towards the village where a little crowd of natives stood dancing with excitement.

'This is the first time an aeroplane has landed here, I guess,' remarked Sandy, putting his head out of the window. 'Kaoha,' he roared.

The excitement on the beach was intensified, and it was clear that Sandy had been recognized—not a difficult matter in view of his red hair. Several canoes were launched, and by the time the voyagers were near the beach ready to disembark the 'Scud' was surrounded by natives of both sexes and all ages, some swimming and some in canoes. They greeted Sandy joyfully by name, calling him Andie. He in turn spoke to several of them personally, and the air was full of delighted greetings of 'Kaoha'. Leaving the

'Scud' riding at anchor on the still water, the airmen climbed into the willing canoes and were soon on the palm-fringed beach.

Sandy took an old, heavily tattooed native by the arm and pulled him towards Biggles. '

Let me introduce you to Chief Roaring Wave,' he said, and shouted with laughter at the alarmed expression on Biggles's face as the Chief smelt him carefully before rubbing noses. 'The Chief doesn't speak much English, but he knows French, although he prefers to use his own Marquesas,' went on Sandy. 'I know a bit of the lingo so we shall get on all right.'

Biggles noticed that several young men kept in the background, and he called Sandy's attention to the fact. 'They look as if they'd rather hit us on the head with a war club than be friendly,' he observed.

Sandy spoke to the Chief, who answered with a pantomime of actions; then he turned again to the others. 'Roaring Wave says they're afraid of being kidnapped,' he said. 'That'

is the result of Castanelli coming here and running off with Shell-Breaker.'

'Tell him that we are going to try to get Shell-Breaker back,' answered Biggles. Sandy spoke again to the Chief, and once more translated for the benefit of the others. '

He says everything on the island is ours,' he announced. 'He means it, too—you needn't doubt that. They'll give you anything, these people.'

He says he's having a house prepared for us right away, and will give a feast to-night.'

It's all right about the house, but I'm not so sure about the feast,' returned Biggles. 'If that was Castanelli's schooner we saw he ought to arrive here soon after dark. Rather than get involved in a party, we ought to watch for it.'

Sandy had another long conversation with the Chief. 'He understands,' he said, turning to Biggles. 'He is going to send some warriors up into the hills to keep watch, and will warn us when the Avarata shows up. Hello! There's little Full Moon, Shell-Breaker's girl friend. She was with him when they picked me up, you remember.'

A pretty girl of about fifteen years of age, in a light blue pareu—the single garment common to both sexes—her brown skin glowing with health, ran up, laughing, and seized Sandy's hands without any suggestion of shyness. 'Kaoha! Kaoha, Andie,' she said, over and over again.

Sandy pulled her hair affectionately. 'We're going to get Shell-Breaker back,' he told her. At the mention of her lost friend her face clouded. Aue!, she said sadly. 'I weep for him.'

'Come on, let's get some food ashore,' broke in Biggles. 'We'd better bring a few presents for the Chief, too. We can then make ourselves comfortable for the evening.'

Many willing hands helped them with the light task, and they were soon in the 'house' the Chief had placed at their disposal.

'How far are we now from your island?' Biggles asked Sandy.

'Twenty to thirty miles, not more.'

'Wouldn't it be better to use this place as a base?'

I'm afraid we should use too much petrol going to and fro. We might have a lot of journeys to make, going out and back every day, and it would soon use up what we've got. If we go across to my island it wouldn't even be necessary for us to fly; we could just taxi out to the pearl-bed every morning—at least, in calm weather. Then again, I doubt if it would be wise to let too many people know what we are doing. There is always a chance of a schooner calling, and these

people in all innocence might give our game away.'

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Biggles nodded. 'I think you're right,' he said. 'We'll go on to your island as soon as we've settled our account with Castanelli.'

The light meal was soon over, and Ginger, unable to contain his curiosity, strolled outside and walked slowly along the deserted beach to a point beyond the village, which consisted merely of a few palm-thatched huts set in a grove of towering coconut palms. The sea was flat calm. The sun was going down, leaving the sky a pale egg-shell blue. The fronds of the palms, quivering in the last breath of breeze, came gradually to rest. The silence was almost uncanny. Before him stretched the beach, devoid of life except for innumerable hermit crabs that snapped their shells at his approach before bolting into their holes among the rocks. Farther on, the way appeared to be barred by a huge landslide of rocks that had fallen from a cliff above. Remembering Sandy's warning he went no farther, but had stopped to gaze at the scene when there came a patter of footsteps behind him. Looking round he saw that it was Full Moon, carrying a primitive fishing-rod.

'Plenty tupa,' she said, smiling, pointing at the crabs. 'Plenty fish, too. You watch.' She took Ginger's hand and walked on to the rocks, clambering over them until she found a place that suited her, when, baiting her hook with pieces of shrimp, she soon had a number of small fish flopping on the rock, giving each one its native name as she hauled it out, making Ginger repeat the names after her.

Ginger, enthralled, could-only gaze down through the crystal-clear water at the strange world below. He could see every cranny and crevice in the rocks, about which darted shoals of brightly coloured fish, appearing to float in air. Once he saw a huge eel, fully fifteen feet long, with a terrifying face, glide smoothly out of a dark cavern and disappear under an overhanging ledge. He was still watching the spot for it to reappear when he became aware that Full Moon was no longer chattering and, looking round to ascertain the cause of her silence, he saw that she was gazing fixedly at a gloomy cave in the rocks near to which they had passed in order to reach the place they now occupied, and which they would have to re-pass to reach the beach. He, too, stared at the cave, and experienced an

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unpleasant sensation akin to fear when he saw something move. A wild shriek from Full Moon split the silence. Facing the village and cupping her hands round her mouth she screamed, 'Feke—feke—feker

Instantly four or five men dashed out of their houses and raced towards the spot, each carrying a long fish-spear. They shouted excitedly at Full Moon as they approached, but she only pointed to the cave. 'Feke,' she said again.

The men formed a rough semicircle round the front of the cave, while Ginger, who was wishing himself farther from the scene, moved back, although he could not get very far on account of the face of cliff that backed the rocks. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he could only watch the cave, whence now darted out long arms towards the natives. Full Moon joined him. 'Ta-ta-ta-ta,' she rattled out. 'We are not afraid of the ugly beast. See, that is my brother.' She pointed to one of the natives. 'He has killed many feke. Pakeka! We will kill this one, too.'

'What is it?' asked Ginger, although he had already a pretty good idea.

'Debil fish. Big Debil fish.'

Ginger pressed himself back against the cliff as the huge octopus slowly emerged from the cave to give battle to the prancing warriors who menaced it. Never in his life had he seen such a horror. It was a huge, dark-purple mass of flesh, covered with warty excrescences, with a head rather like that of an elephant. In it were set two enormous slate-grey eyes, gleaming with demoniac hate. Eight arms coiled and groped out fourteen or fifteen feet in front of it. Ginger was only a few yards from their extremities. The natives stood their ground, slashing and stabbing furiously, but the octopus advanced. Once a slimy arm touched Ginger's leg, and at its icy touch he cried out. One of the warriors slashed it off, but the piece of tentacle still clung to his leg, until with a shuddering of loathing he tore it away.

The natives now launched a furious attack, ripping and slashing with their knives as well as spears. Several of the coiling arms were severed or mutilated, and to Ginger's unspeakable horror the beast began moaning and groaning

in a dreadfully human manner. But the fight was nearly over. The warriors rushed in and thrust again and again into the quivering body until it ceased to move. Full Moon danced with joy. 'We will eat him,'

she cried, laughing into Ginger's face.

'You can—but not me,' declared Ginger, who was nearly sick at the thought. 'Phew, what a brute! I think I'll go back and join the others.'

Leaving Full Moon helping to cut up the carcass, he returned to the house through the gathering twilight. But before he could describe his adventure a tattooed warrior came racing down the hill towards them. 'Atanelli, he come!' he cried.

'He means Castanelli,' declared Sandy. 'We'd better go and hear the news.'

T HERE was no need to go far, for most of the village had assembled on the beach, and the warriors were chattering with excitement. Sandy listened for a moment or two. 'That'

s awkward,' he said, turning to the others. 'It's Castanelli all right, but he has put into a bay on the far side of the island. I ought to have thought of that. He is probably afraid to come in here, in case somebody sticks a spear into him. Some of the young bloods are talking about doing it. I've told them not to; we don't want murder done—at least, not while we're here.'

'Well, what's the best thing to do?' asked Biggles. 'How far is it round the coast to this bay?'

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'You can't get round the coast—except, of course, by canoe. I should say it would be between fifteen and twenty miles.'

Biggles whistled. 'As much as that? How far if we cut across the island?'

'Seven or eight miles, but it isn't easy going. I've never done it, but I've been part of the way. It's the dickens of a pull across that central ridge; it goes up to over three thousand feet, you know. And it's dangerous; not only on account of falling, although if you miss your step you might drop a thousand feet before you hit the jungle underneath, but there are wild animals.'

'What sort of wild animals?' asked Ginger.

'Bulls and dogs. The dogs are the worst. I'm only speaking from hearsay, but I've heard tales about a pack of white dogs that run wild



on a plateau somewhere up there. It's a tame breed gone wild; the dogs must have been left behind by a trader or a whaling-ship years ago. Cats go wild in the same way on many of the islands.'

'I can't think that they'd be likely to worry us,' replied Biggles. 'But I leave it to you. Is the trip practicable? We don't want Castanelli to get away with that boy if we can prevent it.'

'I'll ask Roaring Wave,' answered Sandy, walking over to the Chief. He was soon back. '

Yes, he says it can be done,' he announced, 'but it's tough going. He will let us have some boys who know the way to guide us.'

'Then the sooner we start the better,' declared Biggles. 'What about weapons—had we better take rifles?'

'We don't want to clutter ourselves up more than is necessary,' returned Sandy. 'And we don't want to start a gun battle. We've all got revolvers. They ought to be enough.'

'All right. Then tell the Chief we are ready to start.'

In a few minutes they were on their way, escorted by half-a-dozen warriors with torches, and soon found themselves following a trail up a steep mountain-side, hemmed in on both sides by impenetrable jungle, all the more sinister on account of the flickering torches.

Crossing a brook Ginger felt a hand slip into his, and

looking down to see who it was he was amazed to find

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Full Moon. 'Kaoha,' she said, smiling, showing her white teeth. 'Me come.'

Ginger regarded her bare feet in alarm. 'You'll get your feet cut to pieces,' he said.

'No cut,' declared Full Moon. 'Plenty hard—run on coral.'

Biggles, hearing talking, turned round. 'Here, what are you doing?' he asked, as his eyes fell on Full Moon.

'Oh, leave her alone,' put in Sandy. 'You needn't worry about her. In fact, she may come in useful. Shell-Breaker is her friend, don't forget.'

All right, if you say so,' returned Biggles briefly, and went on up the trail, which now followed the course of the brook. Wild flowers, including many species of orchids, grew in luxuriant profusion among giant maidenhair ferns, and hung in garlands from treeferns. Thousands of guinea-pigs scampered away in front of them. The path became steeper and steeper, climbing higher and higher above deep gorges, and skirting fearful precipices. The breadfruit-trees and coconut palms were left far below. The trail disappeared under enormous boulders, and it was often necessary to leap from rock to rock.

Looking back while passing across an open space, Ginger saw that they were on the saw-like ridge of what must once have been the crater of a volcano. Far below lay the anchorage, the 'Scud', her white wings reflecting the moonlight, looking like a minute winged insect inside the sweep of the bay. Beyond, the open sea gleamed like quicksilver, stretching, it seemed, to eternity, far beyond the concern of mortal men. The path went on up. Ginger had climbed many mountains, but never one like this. It seemed as if the earth itself had exploded, pouring out its rocky heart and leaving it in every conceivable fantastic shape. Now in single file, the torch-bearers, unconcerned, skirted a chasm so deep that Ginger dared not look down it. He remembered it afterwards for a long time. It haunted him in his sleep. But he struggled on along the jagged ridge, clutching at handholds whenever they offered. Full Moon leapt lightly from rock to rock, laughing at Ginger's nervousness.

It was the summit, or rather the apex, of the ridge, and

thereafter the trail began to fall quickly towards a deep, 39

basin-like depression, clear of trees, which Ginger suspected was the crater of the extinct volcano. Reaching the centre of it, the warriors extinguished their fast-expiring torches and sat down to rest. Ginger was glad of it, and threw himself down beside the others. Hardly had he done so when he was brought to his feet again by the bloodcurdling howls of what sounded like a wolf-pack in full cry. The warriors also sprang up in alarm, and took refuge behind the white men. 'The dogs—the dogs!' cried one.

'By gosh! They're right. Here they come!' snapped Biggles, jumping up and taking out his automatic as a pack of white dogs, ghostly in the moonlight, burst into view. They ran straight at the party.

Ginger grabbed Full Moon and thrust her behind him, at the same

time levelling his weapon. Shots rang out. A great white beast was nearly on him. He fired point blank, and then side-stepped, dragging Full Moon with him away from the howling animal, which was instantly set upon by others and torn to pieces.

The crater rang with the crash of shots and the snarls of wounded animals. The warriors had lighted their torches again, and flinging handfuls of dry grass on them soon had a fire blazing. The dogs backed away and sat down in a circle, tongues lolling, like a ring of ghosts; some had dragged away their wounded companions, and these they now devoured with much snarling.

'Well, what do we do next?' Biggles asked Sandy, who was in earnest conversation with the warriors.

'The boys say they will have to make fresh torches; the dogs won't face fire,' answered Sandy.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' returned Biggles grimly. 'Otherwise we look like being stuck here till morning.'

The natives were already collecting bunches of dry grass, and these they now tied on the ends of sticks while others kept guard. However, the dogs made no attempt to attack again, and when the fresh torches were lighted, flooding the scene with a ruddy glare, they began to slink away. The retirement became a rout when the natives began hurling firebrands and rocks at them.

Once the crater had been crossed the path dropped quickly, and the party was soon once more hemmed in by jungle. Soft moss flourished under foot. Nothing more was

seen of the dogs. Ginger reached for an exquisite feathery flower, intending to give it to Full Moon; but the girl seized his arm and pulled it away. 'Puke,' she said quickly. 'Puke.'

Sandy looked round. 'Hi, don't touch that!' he shouted. 'It's puke.'

'What's puke, anyway?' inquired Ginger.

'You touch it and you'll know—and you'll never forget,' returned Sandy. 'It stings like fury. Stinging-nettles are balm compared with that stuff.'

Ginger went on thoughtfully, a trifle resentful that South Sea islands were not living up to the reputation with which he had credited them.

Another hour of steady walking, the last part accompanied by a heavy shower of rain, brought the party once more to the region of coconut palms. The natives stopped and put out their torches. One of them spoke quickly to Sandy.

'They say the bay is just ahead through this palm-grove,' he translated. 'I'll go forward and reconnoitre,' said Biggles, and disappeared between the towering boles of the palms. He was soon back. 'They're quite right,' he said. 'The schooner's there, about a hundred yards from the beach. There's a light on her, but I can't hear a sound, so I don't know whether the crew is on board or not. I can see a bit of a village a little way along; they might be there.'

'I should say Castanelli will be on the boat, and the boys in the village,' said Sandy. 'The boys would come ashore if Castanelli would let them, to drink brandy.'

'Brandy?'

'I mean native brandy—they make it out of the coconut flowers.'

'I see. Well, it doesn't matter. I'm not standing any nonsense from that swine Castanelli. It's no use mincing matters with fellows of his kidney. If he wants trouble he can have it. There are some canoes on the beach, so I propose taking one and going over to the schooner to demand Shell-Breaker. In fact, we can all go in one canoe. Ginger and I will tackle Castanelli. You, Algy, guard our rear in case his boys are about. And you, Sandy, had better remain in charge of the canoe. Tell our boys to stay where 41

they are until we come back.' When he had finished speaking Biggles began to move forward towards the sea, which was soon seen shimmering through the palms. There was no sign of life as they finally emerged from a dense shade of breadfruit-trees near the beach. A fire smouldered near the village; only this and the schooner riding at anchor on the bay revealed that human beings were in the vicinity. Silently they made their way along the beach to where three rather dilapidated canoes were lying, and launched the one that appeared to be in the best state of repair. For a moment or two it floated on the moonlit water with hardly a ripple, and then, under the impetus of the paddle Sandy had picked up, it forged towards the schooner, leaving behind it a wake that gleamed like living fire. Nobody spoke as the canoe came quietly under the schooner's counter. The only sound was the soft drip of water from Sandy's paddle. Biggles reached up and swung himself aboard. Ginger and Algy followed him. Sandy remained

in the canoe. 'Stay here, and keep your gun handy; if you have to use it, be careful, or you may hit one of us,' Biggles told Algy, and then walked towards the companion.

'Who's that?' roared a voice, as they reached the bottom of the steps. Biggles opened the door of the cabin from which the voice came, and was met by the reek of tobacco-smoke and brandy. The yellow light of an oil lamp was half smothered by the fumes. A cheap deal table occupied the centre of the cabin; on it was a chart which Castanelli had apparently been studying. He rose slowly to his feet, staring incredulously at Biggles and Ginger standing in the doorway. Then, ripping out an oath, he thrust the table aside. 'What in thunder do you want?' he snarled. 'I've come for that Rutuona boy you've got aboard,' answered Biggles curtly. 'Oh, you have, have you?' grated Castanelli, panting with fury.

'That's it,' nodded Biggles. 'Are you going to hand him over or do we take him?'

'I'll see you

,' began Castanelli.

Biggles cut him short. 'All right—that's enough,' he said. 'We'll take him. Go and find him, Ginger.'

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Ginger turned and walked along the narrow corridor, shouting the boy's name. He was answered almost at once by a weak voice from the direction of the stern. He found a door and tried it, but it was locked. 'Are you in there, Shell-Breaker?' he called.

'Yes, in here,' came the voice.

Ginger put his heel against the lock and, bracing himself against the far side of the corridor, kicked out with all his strength. The door burst open. A foul stench assailed his nostrils, but he could see nothing, for the place was in darkness. Striking a match, he saw a native boy facing him. He looked weak and emaciated. 'Are you Shell-Breaker?' asked Ginger.

'Yes—me Shell-Breaker.'

'Good!' Ginger told him. 'I've come to take you away. Come on.' He walked back down the corridor with the boy following him.

It's all right, here he is,' he told Biggles, who was still standing at the door of Castanelli's cabin, now holding an automatic in his hand.

Castanelli was mouthing like an animal, spitting out the most blood-curdling threats. 'If I have any further trouble with you, you blackguard, I'll close your foul mouth for good and all,' said Biggles coldly. 'Stay where you are. You show your head on deck and I'll knock it off.' He turned to Ginger. 'Get the boy into the canoe,' he ordered. They went up on deck and found Sandy staring towards the beach, where a canoe was just being launched by several shadowy figures. 'Looks like Castanelli's crew coming back,' observed Sandy. 'What shall we do about it? They'll make trouble.'

'No trouble,' said a small voice from the water, near the side of the canoe. Looking down, Ginger saw the smiling face of Full Moon. 'What are you doing here, you little monkey?' he asked.

'I show you,' said the girl, and disappeared under the water like a fish. 'Into the canoe, everybody,' ordered Biggles. 'We'll get back to the beach.'

By the time they had pushed off, the other canoe was 43

already moving rapidly towards the schooner. Castanelli appeared at the rail of the ship and, seeing the other canoe coming, shouted something.

'What did he say, Sandy?' asked Biggles, for Castanelli had used a language unknown to him.

'He told his boys to sink us.'

'Is that all? Well, let them try it.'

The battle which appeared imminent did not take place, however. The schooner-bound canoe, in accordance with Castanelli's order, swung round to intercept the other, but when it was still several yards away a commotion occurred which those in the other canoe could not at first understand. There was a sudden splashing in the water, a sharp crack of breaking wood, and the canoe capsized, throwing its occupants into the water. A peal of girlish laughter floated across the water above the guttural cries of the Solomon Island boys.

'Ta-ta-to-ta. Full Moon Sink canoe,' chuckled Shell-Breaker, and slid into the water. Ginger watched for him to reappear but did not see him. 'My gosh, Sandy, you were right when you said these people

were like fish,' he remarked. They left Castanelli's crew swimming towards the, schooner and went on to the beach. When they reached it they found Full Moon and Shell-Breaker waiting for them.

'Good! ' said Biggles. 'I think that settles our business, so we may as well start back.'

Several natives had appeared from the direction of the village, but they were disposed to be friendly, and after a short conversation with Shell-Breaker they returned to their huts. Biggles led the way back to where their own boys were waiting for them, Shell-Breaker's appearance causing a minor sensation.

Before starting on the return journey Sandy distributed some biscuits and chocolate which he had brought for the purpose. 'Àtanelli, he ask plenty question, eh?' he asked Shell-Breaker.

'Yes, he say I show him island where you stay long time.'

Did you tell him where it was?'

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'No. I say island plenty far, but he say me plenty liar. Say make me show.'

'Well, you won't have to show him now,' answered Sandy, patting the boy's shoulder. '

You are coming back to the village with us.'

Castanelli's voice, still cursing, reached them faintly as they set off up the hill-side. Dawn had broken by the time they reached the central crater, and this may have accounted for the fact that they saw no signs of the wild dogs. Moreover, being daylight, their task was much easier than it had been in the dark. Nevertheless, it was a weary party that finally marched down through the coconut-grove into the village, where ShellBreaker was received like one returned from the grave. Tired out, the others retired to their hut, and having arranged with Roaring Wave for a watch to be kept for Castanelli's schooner, should it come that way, they passed the rest of the day in sleep, having postponed departure for Sandy's island until dawn the following day.

G INGER woke up with a wild shout ringing in his ears. Startled, and still in a daze, he sprang to his feet, conscious of impending trouble. Running to the door, which overlooked the bay, he stared out, and

saw that dawn had not long broken, for a faint flush of pink still diffused the pale azure sky; the palms stirred uneasily and a ripple spread across the face of the tranquil water as the 45

dawn-wind caressed it. He looked first at the 'Scud', it was still at its moorings, rocking gently as the ripple reached it. Then another movement caught his eyes. A brown figure was racing along the beach. It was Full Moon. 'Àtanelli, he come!' she cried.

'What's that?' asked Biggles, from inside the hut. He had risen, and was putting on his jacket.

'It's Full Moon. She says Castanelli is coming,' answered Ginger. Two steps brought Biggles to the door. 'Where is he?' he asked. 'I don't see him,' replied Ginger. 'Yes—look!' He pointed to a rugged mass of rock, a small islet which stood near the mouth of the bay, from behind which now appeared the schooner, all sails set to catch the light breeze before which it moved over the water as silently and gracefully as a bird. It heeled a little as the wind freshened, and came straight towards the beach as if Castanelli intended coming close inshore before dropping anchor.

'What's he doing? Why doesn't he shorten sail?' asked Sandy, who had now joined the others outside the door.

The schooner itself supplied the answer. It suddenly swung round and bore down on the '

Scud'.

'Look out! He's going to ram us!' cried Biggles.

For a moment a sort of panic prevailed, everybody acting as he thought best. Ginger dashed down to the water and struck out for the 'Scud', for the nearest canoe was some distance away. Full Moon joined him, slipping through the water with the effortless ease of a fish, the blue pareu she wore clinging to her lithe body like a skin. 'What you do?'

she asked Ginger naively.

'Cut the cable,' gasped Ginger. 'Àtanelli ram her.'

'Me cut,' said Full Moon, smiling, and went on at a speed which left Ginger far behind. It was only about a hundred yards to the 'Scud', but to Ginger, in his haste, it seemed more like a mile. Long before he



reached the machine he saw Full Moon swarm nimbly up the anchor rope and sit astride the nacelle. Her knife flashed in the bright sunlight. But by this time the schooner was only a cable's length away and travelling fast before the swiftly freshening breeze.

Fortunately, the wind came from the sea, so as soon as 46

the cable was severed the 'Scud' began to drift inshore. Instantly the Avarata altered its course to follow, leaving no possible room for doubt as to Castanelli's intention. The direction of the 'Scud's' drift being inshore, however, lessened the distance Ginger had to travel. It came towards him broadside-on, threatening to force him under water, but he grabbed a wing-float and hung on. His weight on the float caused the wing to tilt down, and upon it he now climbed, squelching water and gasping for breath, for the fast swim had taken the wind out of him. Full Moon was still sitting on the nose of the machine watching the approaching schooner helplessly. Yelling to her to hold tight, Ginger ran up the wing, across the centre-section, and then to the tip of the far wing, which was, of course, nearer to the schooner. He knew that if the Avarata struck the flying boat her sharp bows would crush it beyond all hope of repair, and for a moment or two it seemed as if nothing could prevent this from happening. There was no means by which Ginger could move the 'Scud' out of the track of the schooner. There was no time to start the engines. Castanelli evidently realized this, for his swarthy face was wreathed in smiles as he stood at the wheel with his boys around him.

—But Ginger knew something that Castanelli did not know; that a flying-boat, owing to its shallow draught, rests on water as lightly as a feather, so that a child standing on a firm platform can move it. Ginger had no platform to stand on, for he was standing on the machine itself and therefore unable to move it. But he knew that if he could reach the schooner's bows before they struck the machine he would be able to fend the flying-boat away. It was now clear that the schooner would strike the 'Scud's' seaward wing, so he stood still, hands out, waiting. He nearly went into the sea when the machine tilted suddenly, as somebody else climbed on board, but there was no time to see who it was. At the last moment the bows of the schooner seemed to bear down on him like a monstrous guillotine. With the curious faculty for noticing details which comes to one in such moments, he saw that the iron anchor was still dripping water and mud. Bracing his feet as far as he was able on the main spar, which he could feel under the fabric, 47

he leaned outwards and clutched at the schooner's bows with both

hands. Instantly the wing under his feet seemed to slide away from him as it took the weight of the schooner transmitted through his body. For a second he hung on, his body as rigid as a steel spring; then the 'Scud' began to swing round and he knew that he must fall. Even so he gave a final thrust with his feet. The wing shot away from under him and he fell headlong into the sea. A noise of rushing water filled his ears. A great black shape swept past him, and he struck out away from it into a strange world of profound blue. His lungs felt as if they must burst. He became sure of it. They could not endure such agony. He felt his body rising, but by this time he was too far gone to swim. Flashes of white light began to dance in, front of his eyes; they grew brighter and brighter; then, almost with the violence of an explosion, his head broke the surface of the water and he filled his lungs with a mighty gasp.

For a moment or two he could only paddle feebly, just able to keep himself afloat; but then, as his strength returned to him, he looked round, and saw the scene through a sort of hazy blur. Full Moon was a few yards away, streaking towards him. Nearer to the beach was the 'Scud', undamaged, with Biggles standing on the wing looking in his direction. The schooner was some, distance away, her canvas fluttering as she came round.

Ginger would never have got to the machine or the beach unaided, for he was completely exhausted; indeed, he was half drowned; but Full Moon came to his assistance and made him put his hand on her shoulder. Biggles, seeing them coming, disappeared into the cockpit of the machine, and a moment later, to Ginger's surprise, the engines started up. As he reached the 'Scud', Sandy dragged him on board; Full Moon followed; and not until then did he see the need for urgency. The Avarata had turned about, and was once more bearing down on them.

'Good work, laddie,' said Sandy. 'And that goes for Full Moon, too.'

'Why doesn't somebody shoot that skunk?' gasped Ginger, in a pained voice, staring at Castanelli, who was still at the wheel of the schooner.

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'Because we don't want to start a pitched battle,' returned Algy, who was busy stowing gear into place.

Ginger saw that Shell-Breaker was also in the machine, and looked at Sandy inquiringly. If we leave him behind Castanelli may get hold of

him,' explained Sandy, as the engines roared and the machine began to move forward.

'Gosh! we're taking off,' cried Ginger.

'There's no sense in sitting here and letting Castanelli ram us,' shouted Algy. 'He means business. Biggles says he's going to clear out and save any further trouble.'

Ginger nodded and sat down with a jolt as the machine bumped badly. 'What's going on?'

he asked anxiously.

Algy was staring forward over Biggles's shoulder, a startled expression on his face.

'What is it?' asked Ginger; now thoroughly alarmed, and got up to look. One glance, and there was no need to ask further questions. The 'Scud' was taking off straight into a sea which, except for a miracle or superb pilotage, would capsize them. He could guess what had happened. On account of the direction of the wind, Biggles had been compelled to take off towards the open ocean, unaware that outside the bay a choppy sea was running. And because the machine was heavily loaded it was taking an unusually long run. Now, when the size of the waves could be seen, it was too late to stop. To attempt to turn the machine at the rate it was now travelling would have been the most certain way to wreck it. So Biggles dared not turn, nor dared he throttle back, for the way the machine now had on it was sufficient to carry it into the white-crested breakers that surged across the mouth of the bay. So he could only go on, trusting that the machine would lift before it struck the curling cambers. Ginger held his breath as the machine tore on at ever-increasing speed to what looked like certain destruction. Neither Sandy nor Algy spoke. Not a muscle of Biggles's face moved. Twice he jerked the joystick back in an attempt to 'unstick' the machine, but here again, by a sort of bitter irony, the very calmness of the water in the bay defeated-him; for a heavily loaded machine needs the

tick' of a small wave to break it clear from the surface of the water. The machine roared on, over water that was now suddenly turbulent. A green-flecked, foam-crested breaker, curling over at the top, reared high in front of it, and then swept down as if determined on the flying-boat's destruction. Biggles jerked the stick back into his stomach

in a last effort to avoid the liquid avalanche. The machine lifted, but only sluggishly. The wave broke. There was a mighty cloud of spray. The machine shuddered and rocked. Then a force seemed to rise up beneath it and fling it into the air. For a moment it hung, rocking, like a bird that has been wounded, while the propellers threshed the air; then, just as it seemed that it must stall and fall into the breakers, the engines picked it up and it rose into the air. The danger was past. Ginger sank down limply on a case of bully beef. The others did the same—except the two Polynesians, who had been blissfully unaware of the danger.

‘Hey, mon, that’s one way of taking off,’ growled Sandy. ‘It’s one I don’t like,’ remarked Algy bitterly.

Now that the machine was steady, Ginger stood up and began wringing the salt water out of his clothes. Looking out of the side window he saw the island fast disappearing astern, with the schooner looking like a toy boat on the water. ‘I’m glad to be out of that,’

he remarked. ‘I don’t mind an occasional shock, but I don’t like too many in quick succession. And without any breakfast, too,’ he added plaintively.

‘Don’t worry, we shall be at the island in a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes,’

announced Sandy.

‘Does Biggles know where it is?’

‘I gave him the bearing yesterday.’

‘Then if it was correct he’ll find it,’ declared Ginger.

In ten minutes the island came into view, and in as many more the ‘Scud’ was gliding down to an anchorage in a lagoon so perfect that Ginger was enchanted. He looked at Shell-Breaker and Full Moon and smiled, noting that they seemed to be taking their first flight not only calmly but as a matter of course. He remarked on this to Sandy. ‘Everything the white man does is marvellous,’ Sandy told him. ‘There can be nothing more wonderful to them

than a box of matches or a gramophone. They’ve seen so many wonders in their time that they are past being astonished.’

Biggles turned round and laughed quietly as the machine ran to rest on the calm water of the lagoon. 'Well, here we are,' he said cheerfully. 'What did you think of my takeoff?'

'Nothing,' declared Sandy. 'I was too scared even to yell.'

'You were no more scared than I was,' returned Biggles. 'If ever I was sure my number was up it was when that big wave reared up and grabbed at us. But let's forget it. I hope that now we are here we shall have a little peace. Where had we better moor the machine? The nearer it is to our camp the better.'

'You can't do better than over there, near that group of palms,' replied Sandy. 'The water is fairly deep right up to the bank, so we can step straight out of the machine on to more or less dry land. That's where I had my hut—over there.' He pointed to a low, palmthatched shelter near the trees. 'And you lived there for three months?' murmured Ginger, thoughtfully. 'I did,' agreed Sandy, as Biggles taxied the machine slowly to the place he had indicated. Presently the engines idled, and then stopped, leaving the machine floating on water so clear that it was hard to believe that it was there.

Biggles climbed out on to a bank of coral. 'We'll tie up here,' he said. 'Then we'll get everything ashore we're likely to need and so be ready to start work in the morning.'

The machine was accordingly made fast by the bows to a projecting piece of coral, a safe mooring as there was not a ripple on the water. Stores and spare petrol were put ashore and then carried to Sandy's hut, which on inspection was found to be serviceable enough to provide them with all the shelter they needed. Shell-Breaker and Full Moon helped in the work, their light-hearted chatter lending an atmosphere of gaiety to the scene. The diving-gear was left on board, as it would, be needed the next day.

'Which way does the pearl-bed lie?' asked Biggles.

'Over there,' answered Sandy, pointing. 'By this time to-morrow we ought to be raising the shell.'

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'By jingo! I've just remembered something,' remarked Algy. 'Who is going to open all the oysters?'

Sandy laughed. 'Open them? That's all right if you've only one or two,

but you don't bother when you are dealing with the number we shall have to handle. We'd better rot them out, as it's called—that is, dump them on the beach. When the fish die the shells open. Then you feel inside to see if there is anything there. if not, you tip the - stuff into a bucket and stir it up. If you happen to have missed a pearl it falls to the bottom. Incidentally, you never open an oyster and throw the refuse into the sea while diving is in progress. It attracts undesirable visitors —such as sharks.'

'Doesn't all this rotting fish stink?' questioned Algy. 'Stinks like nothing on earth, but if we keep it to the lee-ward side of the island it won't worry us.'

While this conversation had been going on they had been preparing a meal, and now they sat down and enjoyed it. Ginger was in favour of making a raid on the pearl-bed right away, but Biggles vetoed this, as he said he wanted to look over the machine and get everything arranged in camp. In any case, Sandy announced that he would be some time assembling the diving-kit.

Ginger amused himself exploring the lagoon with Full Moon and Shell-Breaker. The only word that he could find to describe it was 'fairyland'. What impressed him most was the transparent blueness of the crystal-clear atmosphere and the delicate blue of the sky in contrast to the emerald green of the palms and deep clear turquoise of the water, through which swam hundreds of fish, some large, of every colour of the rainbow. Here and there, close to the reef, which was half hidden under a sun-filtered cloud of spray, great pieces of snow-white coral rose out of the sea; from where he stood they looked like icebergs. The floor of the lagoon was a kaleidoscopic world of mystery, the home of coral of every hue and shape—pink, blue, green, yellow, every colour of an artist's palette was there, unimaginably lovely; delicate antennae of rose or azure curled upwards like living plants; some were shaped like fans, some like cones, and others like gigantic toadstools. It was a brilliant world, yet soft and harmonious, magical, and almost unbelievable. Once Ginger saw a huge

slug, two feet long, crawling on the bottom, and he shuddered, remembering Sandy's words about beauty and horror going hand in hand. Full Moon, noting his disgust, dived into the water and, swimming without effort to the bottom, picked up the slug and brought it to the surface, laughing loudly at Ginger's expression of loathing. She threw it away and climbed out, shaking the water from

her skin like a dog. Ginger judged that the island was three or four miles - long, but not more than three hundred yards across at its widest part. On the lagoon side the water was as smooth as a lake, but on the other side the surf thundered in a cloud of glinting spray, and the coral was strewn with countless thousands of shells, of all shapes, sizes, and colours, with the skeletons of fish, and even the teeth of sea-monsters. The waves were constantly throwing up more.

On the island itself there was not much vegetation except for the palms, which often grew to the water's edge, within reach of the spray. Lush grass and flowering shrubs covered the highest part of the atoll, however, although it was not more than twenty-five feet above water-level, recalling to Ginger's mind Sandy's remark about atolls sometimes being swept by hurricane seas. For the rest, the island was empty of life except for thousands of hermit crabs, that snapped in and out of their shells with a noise like hailstones falling, and a few sea birds. Towards evening, when the tide began to ebb, the silence was eerie, and in the trance-like calm that fell, Ginger, depressed by the utter loneliness of the scene, walked slowly back to the others. Even Full Moon and ShellBreaker were subdued. He found a brisk fire burning, and the cheerful atmosphere of a picnic about the camp.

Biggles called to him. 'You're taking the first watch,' he said. 'I'm not risking Castanelli creeping in on us in the dark.'

'Good enough, Chief,' acknowledged Ginger, squatting down on the coral sand with the others. 'This place is certainly the end of the world,' he observed, thoughtfully. 'I'm not so sure that I should like to be stranded here, after all.'

THE following morning, at break of day, after a night made restless by crabs which insisted on invading the hut, the party boarded the flying-boat with the object of visiting the pearl-bed. Sandy, Full Moon, and Shell-Breaker had paid no attention whatever to the crabs, but the others, moving about, had disturbed them, so they were all rather tired. However, it was a perfect morning for their project, for even the open sea was flat calm, as could be seen by the complete absence of spray on the reef surrounding the lagoon. Under Sandy's guidance Biggles taxied cautiously towards the opening, for although there were no waves the tide poured through the narrow passage with considerable force. It was, Sandy declared, the only opening in the reef, so as the tide ebbed and flowed the water poured in and out with the power of a mill-race. However, Biggles held the flyingboat's bows in the current without difficulty, for he had two engines, and owing to its shallow draught the flying-boat did not feel the tide as a boat

would have done. As soon as they were on the open sea Sandy pointed. 'That's the direction,' he said. 'It's hardly worth taking off. It will be easier to stay on the water, but we must keep a lookout for reefs—you never know where they are going to pop up in these coral seas.'

To Ginger, sitting astride the nacelle, this taxi-ing over blue water in the manner of a speed-boat was exhilarating, and he sang with joy as he gazed at the water ahead for possible obstructions. For a quarter of an hour they drove steadily towards their unseen objective, and then Sandy told Biggles to slow down, for they were near the spot. Naturally, as it was not marked in any way he could not be certain of it to within a few hundred yards, for at sea even instrument-reading are only approximate; so Biggles throttled back to dead slow to allow Sandy to take sound55

ings. But Sandy did not succeed in finding the bottom. 'It must be somewhere about here,

' he said. 'Cruise around for a bit; keep her slow.'

Biggles manoeuvred the flying-boat as Sandy had requested while the others, choosing what they thought the best positions, gazed down into the tranquil depths, looking for the sea-bed.

'All right, Biggles, stop her!' called Sandy. 'Let her drift. We needn't waste petrol.' He took a long look at the island and compared it with their position. 'It's just about here somewhere,' he said again. 'The trouble is, the sea is normal; there's no swell—at least, not as much as when I was here last. That ought to make diving easier, but it makes the place harder to find.'

Biggles throttled right back, leaving the engines just ticking over, so that the 'Scud' rested motionless on the limpid surface of the water, her drift being imperceptible. Several minutes passed in silence, while the whole party gazed down into the depths beneath them.

'If any one could see us they'd think we were crazy,' declared Biggles at last, laughing. '

Looking for the bottom of the sea in a flying-boat. That would make a funny picture.'

'You don't doubt that it's here?' demanded Sandy stiffly.

'Good gracious, no,' replied Biggles promptly. 'I just struck me as



funny, that's all.'

'Hello, what was that? I think I saw something,' cried Ginger. Full Moon looked up into his face and smiled. 'Me see,' she said, and with hardly a ripple slipped into the water.

Ginger watched spellbound as the girl lay on her face on the surface, her head below the water, scrutinizing the depths. Then, suddenly, she sank, and started swimming down with an easy breast-stroke, and a barely perceptible movement of her legs. Ginger could see her clearly, for the water was of such purity that it seemed to be neither air nor water; but he found it difficult to believe his eyes as he watched Full Moon behaving as though the water was her natural home. She went so low that her body became no more than a shadow, a disembodied wraith; occasion56

ally a shoal of fish would pass about her. For a moment she actually disappeared from sight, and Ginger drew a deep breath of relief when he saw her coming swiftly upward. He hand broke the surface first; in it she held a huge oyster. Her head appeared, and she drew in her breath with a long whistling sound that Ginger was to come to know well. Sandy let out a yell of triumph when he saw the shell. 'There you are!' he cried. 'The bottom can't be more than twenty fathoms. I know why we can't see it. The sun is still too low. It was straight overhead when I first spotted the bed.'

'Yes, that might account for it,' agreed Biggles.

Full Moon tossed the shell on board, and scrambled up herself. She spoke excitedly to Sandy in Marquesan, pointing at the same time.

'She says the bottom under us slopes like the side of a hill,' Sandy translated. He pointed towards where the girl had indicated. 'She says it's shallower over there. It must be as I thought. The place I spotted is the top of an underwater mountain. Take the machine over a bit, Biggles.'

As requested, Biggles gave the engines a burst of power which carried the 'Scud' towards the desired locality. 'Stop her—you'll do!' cried Sandy. 'I can see bottom. There it is. I should say it isn't more than six or seven fathoms.'

The other, looking over the side, saw that he was right. The bottom of the sea could be seen plainly, exactly as Sandy had described it, gleaming with half-open oyster-shells. Sandy turned at once to his diving-suit and began to get into it. His face was serious. '

Diving is a dangerous business,' he said gravely. 'Never forget that. There isn't an insurance company in the world that will insure a diver. We needn't dwell on what might happen—there are all sorts of things down there that it's best not to think about. There's only one thing I must mention. One of the worst dangers is the big clams, as big as a bath and weighing over half a ton. The trouble is, they sometimes lie wide open to feed. If a diver steps into one of those—well, he's down for good unless somebody comes down and cuts his leg off. That's why I'm glad we've got Shell-Breaker and Full Moon with us; they'll know what to do if that happens.' He

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gave each of them a hatchet and spoke a few words in Marquesan. They both nodded. Their faces, too, were now serious.

Algy and Ginger had already been trained in the business of fastening up the diving-suit.

'Remember the signals,' said Sandy, as he picked up the heavy helmet. 'There's one I hope you'll never get, and that is four tugs on the line. That means pull till the rope breaks. It's the forlorn chance. It's a million to one against it's ever being needed, but if you do get it you'll know that I'm fast on the bottom, so pull—and pull till the rope breaks. But don't ever pull unless you get a signal. You heard that, Biggles?'

'Yes, I heard you, Sandy,' replied Biggles quietly. 'Good. Right-ho, screw me up,'

continued Sandy, and the helmet sank down into its socket. Ginger and Algy screwed up the nuts, and Sandy dragged his lead-soled feet to the ladder that had been let down beside the hull. He stopped for a moment while his head remained above water, and smiled through the glass. Then he disappeared. Algy was already turning the handle of the air-pump that was part of the equipment. Ginger paid out the life-line.

A minute later a sudden slackening of the line told him that Sandy was on the bottom, and he nodded to Shell-Breaker, who at once lowered a large wire basket for the shell, Full Moon, hatchet in hand, lay staring down into the depths. Several minutes passed; then Ginger felt a single tug on the line. 'Haul up the basket,' he told Shell-Breaker, and presently it came into view with twenty or thirty huge oysters in it. Under Biggles's direction Shell-Breaker tipped them out on the

cabin floor and again lowered the basket.

This was repeated several times, so that by the end of an hour there was a considerable pile of oysters in the cabin, spread about to balance the weight. Sandy had cleared the '

very shallow place, and had moved a short distance away into rather deeper water, but not deep enough to inconvenience him. Occasionally he could be seen crossing a patch of light-coloured coral, or sand, Ginger was not sure which; but against the darker background it was no longer possible to see him. Comparatively speaking, the water was still shallow, which had this advantage: Sandy

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could be brought up quickly without risk of the paralysing cramp which is the bane of diving in deep water, and involves long delays while the diver is brought up in stages so that his body may become accustomed to the change in pressure. Ginger was relieved when he got the signal that Sandy was coming up. A few minutes later his head broke the surface and he climbed laboriously into the flying-boat. , His helmet was unscrewed and removed. 'We're not doing so badly, eh?' were his first words, accompanied by a smile. 'I've come up for a wee bit of a rest.'

'What's it like down there?' asked Ginger.

'Pretty fair,' replied Sandy non-committally. 'There are one or two nasty precipices that it wouldn't do to fall over —just like you get on an ordinary mountain. The coral worried me a bit. It's all shapes, some of it bad—sort of craggy. I have to keep my eye on the lifeline and air-tube all the time to make sure they don't get fouled. It's surprising how the current drags them about. You'd better keep them fairly taut. It's the easiest thing in the world to get your line tangled round a lump of coral.'

Sandy did not remove his diving-suit as he declared his intention of going down again. '

Another spell like the last should see us with about as much shell as we can carry,' he remarked. 'Keep an eye on the weather, Shell-Breaker. You'll know when it's likely to start blowing. We don't want to get caught in a squall.'

Actually, there was no sign of a change in the weather. The sea

remained dead calm, and after a short rest Sandy stood up and prepared to resume his task. Three-quarters of an hour passed. It seemed much longer to those waiting on the aircraft; but, as Biggles remarked, it probably seemed even longer to Sandy. However, the shells continued to come up, the 'Scud' noticeably settling deeper under their weight.

'We've got enough,' said Biggles, at last, regarding the pile. 'I'm not sure that we haven't got too much.' 'Too much?' queried Ginger.

If it started to blow we might find ourselves in a mess. I don't think we could get the machine off the water with this load, and that, to my way of thinking, is going a bit too far beyond the margin of safety. However, the weather

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looks settled enough,' he added, glancing round the sky.

'Sandy will be up any minute now,' said Ginger, feeling the life-line as though he were fishing, hoping to receive the expected signal.

Several minutes passed, but there was no signal.

It's a long time since we had any shell up,' observed Ginger at last. Nobody answered. The minutes passed slowly. Biggles glanced at the watch on the instrument-board. 'He's been down over an hour,' he said, presently.

'He seems to be moving about; I can feel the line twitching,' said Ginger. 'He isn't caught by one of those confounded clams, anyway, or he wouldn't be able to move.'

Full Moon was lying on the hull, staring down into the water. She had not spoken for some time. Suddenly she drew the knife which she carried inside her pareu, and putting it between her teeth, slipped over the side. Her head dipped downwards, and she began to swim.

Ginger looked at Biggles.

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'I suppose she knows what she's doing,' he said.

'By gosh! she's coming back in a hurry,' said Ginger, sharply. Full Moon literally flung herself out of the water on to the flying-boat. Feke! she cried shrilly. 'Big feke!'

'Feke! My God! She means an octopus!' cried Ginger aghast. His face blanched. 'What can we do? Shall we pull him up?'

'He said don't pull unless we got a signal,' said Biggles in a hard voice. 'Andie fight feke,' said Full Moon simply. 'Me no fight —get caught in life-line.'

'You keep on pumping, Algy,' said Ginger, and started to haul on the line. But there was no slack to be taken up. The line was taut, vibrating slightly.

'This is dreadful. Can't we do something?' Algy panted, for he had been pumping steadily for some time.

'We'd better give him a minute. He may be able to fight it off,' said Biggles, whose face was colourless. 'If he wanted us to pull he'd send a signal.'

'Maybe the thing's got his arms pinned to his sides,' suggested Ginger.  
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'Wait!' ordered Biggles.

After that nobody spoke for a full minute. Ginger stood like a statue, holding the rope.

'Shell-Breaker, can you go down and see what's happening?' asked Biggles. Without a word Shell-Breaker dropped the rope that controlled the basket and drew his knife. He was about to dive into the water when a yell from Ginger stopped him. 'He's pulling!' he shouted. 'One—two—three . .

four. That means pull till the rope breaks.' He bent his back and pulled, but he might have been trying to lift a mountain for all the effect it had. 'Biggles! Shell-Breaker —help!' he cried.

They all rushed to his assistance, but not even their united efforts could make the line give an inch.

'My God! We shall tear the air-pipe if we pull any harder,' cried Biggles, in a hoarse voice. 'Keep pumping, Algy. Now, altogether—pull.'

They threw their weight on the rope until it twisted and oozed water under the strain. But it did not move. It's no use. It's holding him down,' muttered Biggles through set teeth. '

We'll try once more. Full Moon—come and pull!

With four of them now on the rope they pulled until the perspiration dripped from their faces and the machine tilted right over on her side under the one-sided pressure. But the rope might have been tied to the bottom of the sea. It did not give an inch. Biggles straightened his back and moistened his lips. 'He signalled that we were to pull until the rope breaks,' he said in a curious voice. 'Well, he's coming up or I'm going to break the rope. It's his only chance now.' He seized the life-line and reefed it round the two steel centre-section bracing struts. 'You hold the rope where you are, Ginger,' he said tersely. 'Cover your face in case it breaks and snaps back. Don't go overboard. Hang on, everybody.' He jumped into the pilot's seat. His hand closed over the throttle. The gentle ticking of the engines became a roar. The machine surged forward, the life-line tautening like a bowstring. The flying-boat went right over on her side with her wing-tip in the water under the terrific pressure, and then began to move in a slow circle. 61

'What are you giving her?' yelled Ginger. 'Half-throttle.'

'The rope doesn't move. Go on.'

'We'll capsize the ship.'

'No—go on.'

The roar of the engines became a bellow.

'It's coming—it's coming!' screamed Ginger.

Biggles gave the throttle a moment of full power. The engines roared, and the aircraft jibbed like a young horse that feels the spurs for the first time. The sea was a churning whirlpool of foam.

'It's coming!' yelled Ginger again, hanging on to the rope. His eyes were bulging out of his head with strain as he heaved and pulled.

Biggles suddenly cut the throttle and dashed to his assistance. Shell-Breaker also seized the rope. 'All together!' cried Biggles. 'Heave!'

The dripping line began to come in, a foot at a time. 'We've got more than Sandy at the end of this rope,' declared Biggles grimly. 'Thank God it's a brand-new one. Stand by with that chopper, Shell-Breaker.'

Foot by foot the rope came in, the flying-boat lying on her beam ends under the onesided weight. Full Moon had been kneeling, staring

down into the water. Suddeny she sprang to her feet. 'Andie, he come,' she shrilled. 'He come with feke!' Knife in hand, her lips parted, showing her teeth, she looked what she was, a savage, but ready to fight against something she knew and understood only too well.

A long tentacle broke the surface and coiled menacingly. Ginger ducked as it swished over his head.

'Never mind that; keep pulling! ' yelled Biggles. 'It's dragging us under,' screamed Ginger.

'Keep pulling! ' shouted Biggles again. 'Here he comes. The beast is hanging on him. Hold the line.' Biggles dropped the rope and, snatching up Shell-Breaker's hatchet, began slashing at something just under the water.

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'Mind you don't cut the line! ' cried Ginger.

Biggles did not answer. A severed tentacle floated up, still coiling and uncoiling like a lasso. Another writhed up and curled itself over the fuselage so that the machine nearly went right over. Biggles severed it with a blow, the blade sinking into the plywood. He snatched it out. Both

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Shell-Breaker and Full Moon were slashing with their knives; nearly in the water, they were taking the most desperate risks. Ginger hung on the rope. Bending forward to take fresh purchase he had a fleeting glimpse of two great lustreless eyes, as large as saucers. He saw Biggles whip out his automatic and blaze between them, firing shot after shot until the weapon was empty.

Ginger went over backwards at the recoil of the boat as the weight suddenly fell from the line. He saw a mass of grey-coloured flesh floating away amid pieces of severed tentacles. For a frightful moment he thought that Sandy had gone, too. Then he saw the diving-helmet appear above the water as Biggles and Full Moon reached down and dragged Sandy up. He fell motionless across the hull.

'Get his helmet off!' shouted Biggles, and dashed to the cockpit. The engines roared and the 'Scud' surged forward.

'Mako finish feke!' cried Full Moon delightedly, pointing to the water

in which several sharks had suddenly appeared; they were fighting for the remains of the octopus. But Ginger was no longer concerned with it. With trembling fingers he removed the helmet from the motionless figure, to disclose Sandy's face, ashen and streaked with blood. 'He's dead!' he cried.

Algy dashed into the cabin and returned with the emergency brandy-flask. He poured a little of the spirit between Sandy's pallid lips.

By this time the 'Scud' was racing towards the entrance to the lagoon at a speed only just short of flying speed. She did, in fact, leave the water an inch or two more than once. Without slackening speed Biggles tore through the opening of the reef on to the still water of the lagoon, and brought the machine to a standstill at her anchorage. Then he switched off and helped the others to carry Sandy ashore. As they laid him gently on the sloping beach of powdered coral and shell he opened his eyes and gazed at the blue sky above with an expression on his face which Ginger never forgot. 'Ye saved the shell all right, I hope?' he said, weakly.

'Why, you old skinflint, of course we did,' answered Biggles, with a catch in his voice. '

We've got you, that's all that really matters. All right, boys; let's get this diving

gear off him. Do you feel well enough for us to take it off, Sandy?'

'Aye, I'm a wee bit bruised, nothing more.'

Which was, the others soon discovered, an understatement of fact, for he was bruised from head to foot. Vivid red bands showed where the creature had gripped him with its tentacles. However, he was not seriously injured, and he was soon sitting up, sipping a drop of 'whusky'—just to pull him together.

'Well, I suppose this means the end of the show?' said Biggles.

'Why?' demanded Sandy. 'Nothing of the sort. That's all part of the day's work in a diver'

s life.'

Ginger stared incredulously. 'Do you mean—you'd go down there again?' he asked unbelievably.



‘Certainly. I’d feel safer now than I did before.’

‘How on earth do you make that out?’ asked Algy.

Because there won’t be any more big fellows like that one. He would be king of the roost over a big area. If you have killed him, as I expect you must have done, it will be as safe down there as it is here. These devil fish are the real kings of the ocean; other fish know that and keep out of the way.’

‘The sharks finished off the pieces,’ Ginger told him.

‘They would,’ grinned Sandy, rising stiffly to his feet. ‘The truth is, I was a fool. There was a deep sort of dell-hole in the coral. I didn’t much like the look of it, particularly as there were no small fish about, or young octopus. You can usually see plenty of the little fellows, but they don’t trouble you; they scramble about the rocks like big spiders. I thought it was odd that they had all disappeared. But there were some big shells in the hole, so I took a chance. In a way I was lucky, because the first feeler settled round my helmet. I guessed what it was, so knowing the tricks of the trade I put my arms straight up to prevent them from being pinned to my sides. A good thing I did, for the next tentacle went round my waist. If my arms hadn’t been free I should have been finished, but as they were, I could fight. The scrap must have lasted twenty minutes. It seemed like hours. I could see the thing staring at me from a cave. He was only using four arms on me, so I guessed he was anchoring himself with the others. 64

It was no use my signalling to be pulled up while he was holding on to the coral with four arms; it would have needed a battleship to shift him. But I reckoned that if I could slash one or two of his arms he would bring the others into play, and so weaken his hold on the bottom. My greatest fear was that the line or air-tube would get tangled up with the tentacles—that would have been the end. Luckily, you had kept them taut, as I suggested. It was a rare fight between the two of us down there on the ‘sea floor. I cut the ends off two of his arms, and I saw him bring out two more. I was tempted to signal to you to pull me up, but I wanted to make sure. But I was weakening, and he knew it. He was trying to drag me towards him all the time. I could see his eyes. You don’t know what a temptation it was to go forward and plunge my knife between them; it became a sort of obsession, but it would have been fatal. Every now and then the brute squirted out a lot of sepia so that I couldn’t see his arms—or anything else, for that matter. He beat me in the end. I was whacked, My arms were like lead from holding them up. Then he got my left arm pinned

to my side, and I knew that it was only a question of time before he got the other. By then he had managed to drag me to within a couple of yards of him, so I gave the four tugs. And that's all I remember.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'It was a grim business,' he said. 'I don't like the idea of your going down there again.'

À day's rest and I shall be as right as rain,' declared Sandy. 'Why, mon, there's a fortune down there on the bottom, and a fortune is always worth a bit of risk.'

'Well, we'll wash out for to-day, at any rate, and see how you feel to-morrow,' decided Biggles. 'What shall we do with all this shell?'

'Haul it across to the west side of the island and spread it about on the beach above highwater mark. In a day or two we shall be able to see what the luck is like. There isn't a more exciting game in the world than opening shell, knowing that any one might hold a small fortune.'

Right-ho,' agreed Biggles. 'We'll have a bite of lunch and then, while you take things easy, we'll shift the shell.'

S ANDY was bruised rather more than he had at first pretended, and it was two days before he felt able to continue diving. The others were so alarmed at his terrible experience that they were half-inclined to abandon the project; but Sandy would not hear of it, insisting that now the big octopus was no longer there, there was nothing more to fear; and as he was the one most concerned the others gave way. So on the third day they again taxied out to the diving-ground, where Sandy made several descents, but by lunchtime he was showing signs of strain, and Biggles decided to suspend operations until the following day, as time was no object. Sandy admitted that he had nearly cleared the shallow area, and in future it would be necessary for him gradually to work deeper as he descended the slopes of the under-water mountain. Not that he ever intended to go really deep. He admitted frankly that deep-sea work was beyond his strength, ability, or inclination; at the same time he pointed out that it would not be necessary, for if the shell they had already gathered yielded the harvest which might reasonably be expected, it would be both easier and safer to spend part of the proceeds in fitting out a schooner with an experienced crew, and hiring expert Japanese divers from Thursday Island, near the north Australian coast, the headquarters of some of the finest divers in the world. They themselves could superintend operations from the flying-boat, which would at the same time enable them to keep in touch with Tahiti. The work they were engaged on

would then no longer be a secret, but as they would have reaped the cream of the bed this would not matter. There would be no need for any of them to take further risks. And this was so obviously sound, common-sense reasoning, that the others agreed without demur. As they taxied back towards the island after abandoning 66

work for the day, Sandy suddenly looked up with a smile. 'Here, I'll tell you what!' he cried. 'Let's spend the afternoon examining our first day's catch. The oysters will be dead by now, so apart from the stink, which will not be pleasant, the job should be easy.'

A cheer from Ginger greeted this proposal. "That sounds a fine idea," he declared.

'We'll stack the shell on the beach as we clean it and get a schooner to pick it up later on,

' continued Sandy. 'It's worth real money, so we might as well have it. In fact, if the pearls don't turn out too well we may be glad of it.'

And so it was agreed, and after a picnic lunch the whole party went over to the west side of the island, no very great distance, where the shell had been spread out to rot. Sandy and the two Polynesians laughed at the expressions of disgust on the faces of the others as they approached the now dead oysters. It's a good thing the wind is blowing the stink straight out to sea; if it dropped altogether, or blew the other way, you'd know the meaning of the word "fug",' said Sandy, smiling. Then, suddenly, his smile faded, to be replaced by a thoughtful frown.

'What's the matter?' asked Biggles, who was watching him. 'A thought just struck me,' returned Sandy, shaking his head doubtfully. 'I'm not sure that we were altogether wise to rot the shell, after all. This stink will be noticeable twenty miles out to sea, and any one who has ever smelt it never forgets what it is.'

'You mean—Castanelli might get a whiff of it?' Sandy nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'In which case all he would have to do would be to follow it up in order to discover the place where it starts from.'

'You bet he would.'

Hm, that's rather a pity, but it can't be helped now. We won't do it again. In future we'll open the shell and bury the refuse as soon as we have finished with it.' 'Aye, that's the best way.'

Sandy was carrying a pail and an empty biscuit-tin, and

on reaching the shell he filled the bucket with sea-water 67

and, watched with absorbed interest by the others, he commenced operations. He picked up the shells one by one, and holding them over the bucket explored the interior with his fingers before tipping the remains of the dead oyster into the pail. The empty shells he tossed on one side for Shell-Breaker to stack into a neat pile. In this way he had opened nearly forty shells, tossing each one aside with a grunt of disappointment, before he let out a wild whoop and held up a small white object that appeared to glow with inward fire. It was the size of a small pebble.' 'Well, there's number one,' he declared, as the pearl passed quickly from hand to hand. 'Now we've broken our luck we shall probably get on better.'

'What's that one worth?' asked Ginger.

'I'll hit the buyer on the nose if he offers me less than five hundred pounds for it,' swore Sandy.

'You're going to be a long time getting a hatful at this rate,' put in Biggles, smiling.

'Don't you be in a hurry,' answered Sandy seriously. 'You never know how things are going to pan out at this game. You can open a thousand oysters without finding a seed pearl, and then find six in succession. We're bound to find one or two real big 'uns in all this shell, or I'm going to be very surprised.'

As if to confirm his statement the very next shell yielded five small pearls—not very valuable, Sandy admitted, but they all added to the harvest. And so the work went on. A high spot occurred when Sandy suddenly held up a huge, heart-shaped gem. He was even more excited than the others. 'That's something to write home about,' he declared enthusiastically. 'One day that's going to sit on a queen's crown, or a princess's tiara, and when you see pictures of it in the paper you'll get a kick out of remembering that it was you who helped to fish it up from the bottom of the sea. That pearl is worth five thousand pounds of anybody's money.'

'It's lovely,' breathed Ginger.

'It will never again look so lovely as it does at this moment,' muttered regretfully. The work continued, the little heap of pearls in the tin

growing steadily larger, and the empty shells making a big 68

mound near the scene of operations. When the last shell had been examined and thrown aside, the total catch was found to be five large pearls of considerable value, nineteen of medium size, one 'double button', or two pearls joined together, and a double handful of seed pearls—small pearls of no great value.

'Well, that's a pretty good average, so we can't complain,' said Sandy, with satisfaction. '

If that little lot doesn't fetch twenty thousand pounds I'll eat my hat.' 'What are these cultured pearls one hears so much about?' asked Ginger. 'I've heard that the Japanese run sort of oyster farms to produce them. They put bits of grit inside the shells, or something, to encourage the oyster to spread the nacre over them.'

'Pah! ' Sandy made a grimace of disgust. 'Don't talk to me about cultured pearls. They're not in the same class as real pearls. You'll soon be able to buy 'em at Woolworth's at ten a penny.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Nothing much, when they first come out of the shell. But they're made too fast, and like most things that are made in a hurry they don't last. They lack the fire of the others, and they're liable to peel. A pearl is made up of a number of skins, like an onion, you know.'

While he was speaking Sandy's fingers were groping about in the slush at the bottom of the pail, searching for any pearls that might have been overlooked.

'By jingo! That reminds me,' cried Ginger.

Of what?' asked Biggles.

'That shell Full Moon fished up when she made her first dive. I kept it by itself. I put it over there by that tree and forgot all about it. I'll go and fetch it.' He ran across to the palm he had indicated and came back with the half-open oyster in his hand. 'I'm not very hopeful.' he said, eyeing the shell disapprovingly, for compared with some of the others it was very small, and diseased in places. The outside was covered with barnacles, and it was obviously of great age. He sat down on the sand and plunged his fingers into the corruption that a few days before had been a live oyster. Suddenly he stiffened and looked up at the others. His eyes opened wide. His face turned pale

and his breath came quickly.

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Àha—that's how it gets you when you feel the first one,' declared Sandy. Ginger slowly withdrew his fingers and held up an enormous round pearl, the size of a marble. It was not white, but pink, and as it lay in his trembling palm it gleamed with an uncanny light, as if it were imbued with life.

Silence fell. It was broken by Sandy. 'Sweet Andrew of Scotland!' he breathed, whitefaced, staring at the pearl as if it exerted an irresistible fascination over him. 'I've seen some pearls in my time, and some beauties among 'em, but I've never seen anything like that. That baby is going to cause more than a flutter when it reaches Paris.'

Ginger had tossed the shell aside, and was about to speak when Full Moon uttered a little cry. She was staring at the shell, which gaped open. The others looked, and saw something pink gleaming between the lips of the shell. In a silence broken only by the harsh rustle of the palms Ginger picked it up and slowly withdrew a second rose-tinted pearl. He laid it on the palm of his left hand with the other. The two made a perfect pair. Sandy seemed to have difficulty in speaking. 'Look at 'em! ' he croaked. Then again, '

Look at 'em! Look hard, boys, because you're looking at something you'll never see again as long as you live—no, not if you live to be a million. I tell you, men have been pearling in these seas for years, some of 'em for half a century, without ever seeing anything like that. Not many men alive have seen one pearl of that class, let alone two. It makes me feel funny inside to look at 'em.'

`Now we can have one each.'

Èach?'

Òne for us, and the other for Full Moon.'

`What!' Sandy nearly choked. 'Part a pair like that? You can't do it. It would be criminal. Those two pearls were born together, and must always stay together. Don't you realize what it means to have a pair—no, maybe you don't. Either of those pearls alone would be worth ten thousand pounds, but as a pair you could ask your own price—and get it. Kings have pawned their kingdoms for less.'

`Yes, they'll have to stay together,' agreed Biggles. `But what about

The girl pursed her lips. 'Me no want,' she said simply. 'You buy me red beads at Lo Sing's store, maybe?' 'Sure we will,' agreed Sandy.

'You'll give her a sixpenny string of pearls for one of those?' cried Ginger indignantly.

'She'd rather have 'em. She said so herself, and she means it.'

'Well, it seems a raw deal to me,' grumbled Ginger. 'Me happy,' cried Full Moon cheerfully. 'Me plenty bead.'

'Well, if you say so,' agreed Ginger reluctantly. 'You help yourself to anything in Lo Sing'

s store that you like when we get back to Rutuona, and let these skunks pay the bill.'

Full Moon clapped her hands delightedly. 'Plenty brilliantine, plenty face-powder,' she cried.

Ginger looked horrified, but Sandy grinned. 'You wait and see her when she comes out of the store,' he chuckled. 'She'll look like a French doll, and stink like a chemist's shop for a couple of days, and kid herself she's the cat's whisker. Then she'll go swimming and forget all about it.' He got up. 'We might as well be getting back,' he said. 'I can do with a nice cup of tea to wash this stink out of my throat. We'd better find a safe place for these pearls. We won't put them on the 'Scud' till we go for good, in case of accidents.'

They walked back by the side of the lagoon to the camp, where before doing anything else Sandy buried the tin containing the pearls in the soft sand under a conspicuous crag of sun-bleached coral. 'They should be all right there,' he said, as he rejoined the others, who were preparing tea.

When the meal was over, Biggles leaned back and lit a cigarette. Sandy lit his pipe. 'I call that a pretty good day's work,' he said. 'Another load or two and we're all set for an easy life. All I ask is that the weather holds.'

'And the food-supply,' put in Biggles. 'We're getting a bit low. I didn't reckon on six mouths to fill when I made up the list of stores.'

'We ought to help it out with fish,' replied Sandy. 'There are plenty in the water. There's a line and some hooks over there; I brought 'em for that purpose. Full Moon and ShellBreaker know the sorts worth eating.' He turned to 71

the two Polynesians. 'You kids go and get some fish,' he ordered. Shell-Breaker and Full Moon sprang to their feet, and picked up the fishing-equipment.

'Hold on, I'm coming with you.' Ginger told them, and overtook them as they walked away along the beach of white coral sand.

They went on for some distance, and after examining several places Full Moon stopped at a tiny cove, where the coral dropped sheer into a pool such as Ginger had often tried to imagine. Not a ripple disturbed its surface, and shoals of fish could be seen swimming lazily in the crystal-clear water. From the coral edge to the pool was a drop of anything from two to twenty feet, but there were plenty of natural steps leading down to the water. A final touch of artistry was supplied by a little group of palms, one of which hung far out over the pool, the fronds touching its faithfully reflected image. Full Moon baited a hook with a piece of shell-fish, of which there were vast numbers clinging to the coral, and was soon pulling fish ashore as fast as she could throw out the line. Ginger took a turn, and added to the ever-growing pile of fish of all shapes, sizes, and colours that lay flapping on the bank. 'We've got enough,' he said at last. 'It's no use killing the poor brutes for the sake of killing them, and it's more like hard work than sport, anyway. I doubt if we shall be able to eat all we've got, as it is.'

'Me swim.' Full Moon threw the line aside and went into the water like an otter. Ginger watched her for a minute as she turned easily this way and that far under the water, as much like a mermaid as a human being could be. Then he began peeling off his shirt. 'I'm going to have a spot of this,' he told Shell-Breaker, who was collecting some fallen coconuts. Kicking off his canvas shoes he went to the edge of the water and looked for the girl. The ripples made by her entry into the pool were lapping gently against the coral; he could see the bottom clearly, but of Full Moon there was no sign. He waited, a feeling of uneasiness fast becoming anxiety as the girl did not reappear. 'Hi! ShellBreaker!' he cried, in a high-pitched voice. 'Something's happened to Full Moon.'

The boy dropped the coconuts he was carrying in his 72



arms and ran to the edge of the pool, his eyes scrutinizing every section of it in quick succession. A puzzled look crossed his face. He stared out towards the open lagoon for a minute, and then started working swiftly round the edge of the cove, examining the rough coral walls as he went. The alarm plainly depicted on his face did nothing to allay Ginger's anxiety, which by this time was not far short of panic. Suddenly Shell-Breaker drew himself up and dived into the water. Ginger ran to the spot. For a moment he could see nothing owing to the wave-lets caused by Shell-Breaker's plunge; then, as they rippled away and splashed against the coral, he looked eagerly for the Polynesian. There was no sign of him. Ginger stared and stared again, unable to believe his eyes. A minute passed . . . two minutes, and still Shell-Breaker did not reappear. Ginger knew that not even the Polynesian can stay under water much longer than that, and a terrible fear took possession of him. Never had he felt so utterly helpless. He ran a little way along the coral bank to get a better view of the place where the boy had disappeared, but all he could see was a dark area, as if the water deepened. It was now more than five minutes since Full Moon had dived into the pool, and he knew that no human being could survive such an immersion. 'An octopus has got her,' he thought, sick with horror, and filled with loathing of the beautiful spot where, nevertheless, death lurked.

He was about to run back to the others in order to tell them what had happened when the water suddenly parted and a head appeared. It was Full Moon. She let out a ripple of laughter.

'Here, what's the game? You nearly frightened me to death,' cried Ginger, angrily, but breathing deeply from relief.

Full Moon's answer was another peal of laughter. 'Me swim,' she called, blowing bubbles on the surface of the water.

'You're not a woman, you're a fish,' sneered Ginger.

Shell-Breaker appeared. They both swam to the edge of the coral where Ginger stood. Full Moon held up a brown hand. 'Come,' she said.

'Where?' asked Ginger suspiciously.

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'Me show.'

'Show what?'

Bottom of sea. Bottom of sea beautiful.'

'I can see all I want of that from here,' declared Ginger.

`Come,' said Full Moon, again. 'Me show.'

Shell-Breaker joined in. 'Yes, we show,' he said. He pulled himself up on the coral and motioned Ginger to dive. 'Take plenty breath, come with me.'

`No fear.'

`White man afraid—ha.'

Ginger flushed. 'I'm not a blinking eel if you are,' he snorted. 'Anyway, I'll show you if I'

m afraid.' He took a deep breath and dived. He was about to turn upwards when he became aware that Shell-Breaker and Full Moon were on either side of him, beckoning as naturally as if they were on land instead of under water. He followed them, and saw that they were swimming towards a gloomy cave, about twenty feet under the water. He waited for no more, but turning away shot to the surface and pulled himself up on the coral with his legs dangling in the water.

The two natives appeared. Full Moon looked hurt. 'You afraid,' she said, reproachfully. '

You come—plenty air.'

Àir?'

`Plenty air in cave.'

`What about feke?'

`No feke.'

`Right! I'm coming.' Again Ginger took a deep breath

and dived. He saw that the others were beside him, swimming easily towards the cave, and this time he followed them. To say that he was frightened as he went through

the gloomy entrance would be to put it mildly, but he set his teeth and swam on grimly behind the two figures which were gliding through the water in front of him, still beckoning. His endurance was nearly exhausted. He felt that he must breathe or die, but he knew that he had already come too far to get back, so he could only go on, hoping that

Full Moon's promise of 'plenty air' was correct. Panic

seized him as something clutched his arm, and he tore it

away, only to see that it was Full Moon trying to help him along. She shot upwards. He followed, and a moment later

his head broke the surface. For a little while he could only gasp; then, looking about him, he saw Full Moon and

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Shell-Breaker sitting on a ledge of coral in what was clearly a cave, but such a cave as he could never have imagined. He swam up to them and climbed out, and not until then did he realize fully the wonder of the scene about him.

The cave was only a short one, and led to a larger cavity in the coral, the roof of which was above water-level. The beauty of it struck him speechless. It was ethereal, a fairy grotto, blue beyond anything he had ever seen, a deep, unreal, cerulean blue. The water was pure ultramarine, and glowed like blue fire. The drops of water that fell from his legs were blue sparks. At first he could not make out where the light came from; then he perceived that it came through the tunnel, and was refracted by its passage through the water. The result was extraordinary. It was as if the place was illuminated by hidden blue electric lights. He dipped his hand into the water; instantly it glistened silvery-blue, as though he had plunged his hand into cold blue fire rather than water. The whole grotto was charged with such a supernatural light that the appearance of a sea-nymph would not have surprised him. Indeed, the two Polynesians looked more like sirens than human beings.

For some time he sat still, enchanted by the scene, staring at the

pellucid sapphire water through which tiny fish moved lazily over a background of white sand, and the iridescent dome overhead. And as he looked a strange feeling came over him that he was no longer on earth, but was a celestial being sitting in a blue cloud.

'This is certainly ,the most incredible place I have ever seen,' he told the others at last. He knew, of course, that coral is built up by countless millions of minute sea creatures, and that through the ages whole islands have been constructed by this means. Flotsam, such as seaweed, is thrown upon them by the waves; in time it rots and a speck of mould is formed. On this, sooner or later, a seed is washed by the sea, or dropped by a bird; a plant grows, dies, and rots in turn to provide a further quantity of soil capable of supporting a larger plant. This he knew, and he realized that thus had grown Sandy's Island. What he may not have known was that in course of time the coral-makers die; the massive home that they have built loses its strength, and ultimately decays. Coral formations are

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not necessarily solid; cavities are left; and when the coral is dead these are enlarged by the constant action of the water. Such cavities, or holes, may be small or they may be large. The one in which Ginger found himself was exceptionally large, being between thirty and forty feet long and half that distance in width. From the level of the water to the roof was about twenty feet, and he perceived from the direction of the cave that the grotto was actually under the island; in fact, he judged that the roof could not be more than a few feet below the spot where a few minutes before he had been standing high and dry. In these circumstances it was obvious to him that it would be possible to dig down into the grotto from the outside, and the fact that the air he was breathing was sweet and fresh supported this theory. He could not see them, but he knew that there must be flaws in the coral through which the air could percolate.

At last he rose to his feet. 'I could sit here for hours,' he said, 'but we must be getting back, or the others will wonder what has happened to us.'

Now that he knew the secret he was no longer afraid. He dived into the water, striking out vigorously towards the entrance; the others joined him, and together they shot up to the surface of the pool. 'By gosh! We'll bring the others along here,' declared Ginger, shaking the water off himself. 'But we won't tell them anything about it yet; we'll keep it a secret until they come, and give them a surprise.'

Helping the others to carry the fish, he accompanied them back to the camp.

'You've been a long time,' said Biggles.

'We've been having a swim,' admitted Ginger casually.

On each of the next two days they were up at dawn, and quickly away to the pearl-bed, making the most of the ideal weather which Shell-Breaker repeatedly warned them might not last, for the season of storms was approaching. Both Shell-Breaker and Full Moon shared Sandy's confidence that there would be no more f eke in the locality, and they often swam down to him to keep him company, sometimes bringing a shell up with them. Their behaviour was that of two children on holiday. They teased Ginger so much about his nervousness of the water that on one or two occasions, when Sandy was up for a breather, he dived with them and tried to swim down near them; but he soon discovered that it was much harder than it appeared. Full Moon had told him never to look up when he was deep down in the water, because the distance to the surface was always exaggerated, and somewhat frightening. It was better, she said, to imagine that one was only just under the surface. This, however, only induced Ginger to test the truth of it, and although he was only about thirty feet deep he was appalled by what he saw, and shot upwards in alarm. Under the expert tuition of the two natives, his ability to swim down and remain under water increased rapidly, and by the end of the second day he was disporting himself with them.

He took a last plunge, determined to get down to forty feet and so break his own record. Exerting every ounce of strength he knew that he had succeeded, and was just turning to swim upwards when he saw a shadow pass slowly over a patch of white coral immediately underneath him. He was not particularly alarmed, for he assumed that it was either Shell-Breaker or Full Moon, coming down to tease him, as they often did, and he looked up to see which of them it was. To his unspeakable horror he saw a shark curving round, about twenty feet above him. It was looking

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straight at him. It was not an ordinary shark, but an enormous brute well over twenty feet long and dirty-white in colour.

He gave himself up for lost. He had no knife to defend himself, not that he thought for a moment that he would be able to use one even if

he had. The most dreadful thing of all was that he had to go up towards the creature. He could not stay down for he was at the end of his endurance, and he knew, from previous experience with no danger threatening, that his lungs would be bursting by the time he reached the air. Struggling desperately to keep away from the great fish he began to rise. With ghastly deliberation the shark turned towards him.

It was then that he saw Shell-Breaker and Full Moon coming down, for the scene was as clear as if they were on land. Shell-Breaker was swimming with unbelievable speed straight towards the shark. Ginger was still rising, but his strength was fast ebbing. In a nightmare of horror he watched. He saw the huge brute begin to turn over on its back in order to seize him, as a shark always must to bite its prey; he saw Shell-Breaker flash low across its head, saw him strike, and saw a dark stain spurt from the wound. Again Shell-Breaker struck. The shark turned swiftly, its mighty jaws agape, but by this time Full Moon was underneath and she drove her knife upwards into the shark's stomach. Ginger struggled upwards through water that was no longer clear, but stained with ugly brown patches that he knew must be blood. He saw no more, for the picture became blurred before his eyes; he was conscious only of a terrible sensation that the shark's jaws could close over his feet at any moment. He was at his last gasp when he reached the surface, to be dragged aboard by Algy and Sandy.

For a few seconds he could only lie on the cabin floor, getting his breath in great gasps, almost overcome by nausea caused by shock. 'Are they up yet?' he managed to get out at last, referring to Shell-Breaker and Full Moon.

'Not yet,' said Sandy.

'But—there's a shark—down there.'

'I know, we saw it. The kids went down after it,' returned Sandy. 78

But it will kill them.'

Not on your life,' declared Sandy, confidently. 'They're brought up on that sort of thing. A Marquesan is more than a match for a shark. Occasionally one gets grabbed, but that's only when the attack catches him unprepared from behind. Once they see it, I'd bet on the Marquesans every time. Shark-hunting is a sport with them.'

'It doesn't sound like sport to me,' muttered Ginger, staggering to his feet in order to see what was happening in the water.

Full Moon's head broke the surface, and she scrambled aboard. 'Aue! He was bad, that mako,' she muttered.

Shell-Breaker followed a moment later, and Ginger saw that his shoulder was bleeding. '

By heavens! he's been bitten,' he cried.

'No, it's only a graze,' answered Sandy quickly. 'A shark's hide is like sandpaper—he must have bumped into it.'

The two Polynesians sat breathing heavily on the flying-boat, talking swiftly in their own language.

'What are they saying?' asked Biggles.

Sandy translated. 'They haven't killed it. A swordfish butted into the fight and attacked the shark, which made off, with the swordfish after it. The kids say it was the blood in the water that brought it. Incidentally, they swear the swordfish was bigger than the shark.'

'But they're not as dangerous, are they?' asked Ginger.

'I wouldn't say that,' returned Sandy. 'They don't attack human beings as often as sharks, but when they do—well, it's good-bye. That sword of theirs isn't just an ornament. There'

s more than one case of a swordfish sticking its sword right through the bottom of a ship.'

Ginger looked incredulous.

'You don't believe it, eh? Well, you go and look up the Admiralty records. A swordfish once attacked a Plymouth ship called The Fortune and put its sword through the copper sheeting, a three-inch hardwood plank, and twelve inches of oak—and punctured an oilbarrel on the other side of it. A British man-of-war—I forget its name—was once holed by a swordfish and had to make for port with all its pumps going. Don't you get the wrong idea about swordfish, young feller.'

'Then we'd better be moving,' put in Biggles. 'I hate to think what one of the brutes could do to a ship like this, with only a fraction of an inch of metal between us and the water.'

He turned quickly, as there was a loud splash in the water some distance away. 'Hello!

What's going on?' he ejaculated.

They all stood staring in the direction of the sound. There was nothing to indicate what had made it, but a patch of foam on the surface of the sea told them that they had not been mistaken.

'Look!' cried Ginger shrilly.

The warning was unnecessary, for every one on the flying-boat saw what he had seen. A huge grey shark, either the one that had attacked Ginger or another, leapt high out of the water, so high that it seemed to hang in the air before falling back into the sea with a mighty splash. And it was not alone, for an instant later a giant swordfish broke the surface in the same place. It was fully twenty-five feet long. Apau! cried Shell-Breaker, alarm in his voice. 'Go! Go fast!'

'Better get moving, Biggles; he thinks it's dangerous,' said Sandy quickly. 'And if he thinks it's dangerous you can bet your life it is.'

Biggles dashed to the cockpit, while the others started feverishly clearing the gear that was lying about. Sandy was still in his diving-kit—without the helmet, for he had been resting—but he soon had it off. Glancing up, he saw the swordfish again break the surface less than a hundred yards away. It was coming directly towards the flying-boat.'

Look out, everybody, he means business,' he shouted. 'I'm afraid he's spotted us.'

The first engine started. The second followed. But the 'Scud' had only just started to move when it received a terrific shock that half lifted it out of the water. Every one was thrown down. What was worse, Biggles was hurled across the cockpit, and the machine, left to its own devices, yawed wildly before he could regain the joystick. An instant later the giant fish broke surface about thirty feet away. Biggles jammed the throttle wide open, using one engine only in order to turn the machine away from the fish; but before the aircraft could gather speed there was 80

another violent shock. Something crashed against the hull, and five feet of sword appeared in the cabin, missing Sandy by a few inches. It was withdrawn swiftly, leaving a gaping hole through which water started to pour. Algy flung a towel on it and tried vainly to stem the flow. 'Tell Biggles to take off!' he yelled. 'We shall sink in a couple of



minutes.'

Ginger dashed forward to the cockpit. 'Get in the air! ' he shouted. 'We're holed.'

'I'm trying to,' snapped Biggles.

Ginger saw the swordfish turning on the surface not fifty feet away. 'He's coming again! '

he yelled and, whipping out his automatic, fired shot after shot at the mighty beast. Whether he hit it, he never knew; not that it really mattered, for by this time the 'Scud'

was moving over the water faster even than the fish could travel. He hurried back to the others, to find the cabin in a state of chaos. In spite of their efforts to prevent it, the water was still pouring through the hole and the floor was already awash. 'Tell Biggles to keep going,' shouted Algy. 'If he can get off, the water will run out.'

Ginger dashed back to the cockpit and told Biggles what was happening. 'I can't get her off,' said Biggles tersely. 'I've tried. What with all that shell, and the water, she won't take it.' 'What shall we do?'

'Jettison everything. Chuck the diving-gear overboard—that's the heaviest.'

As he shot back to the cabin Ginger glanced through a side window and saw that they were still a good two miles from the island. The 'Scud' was taxi-ing at terrific speed, but not fast enough to lift. 'Everything over the side,' he yelled. 'Get the diving-gear over. It's our only chance.'

Sandy did not hesitate. He dragged the diving-kit, with the forty-pound leaden boots, to the side. It disappeared from view. The helmet followed. The pump, lines, everything portable went over the sides into the deep blue sea. Ginger began bringing the oysters out as fast as he could, but Full Moon stopped him. 'No! ' she cried. 'Me go,' and without giving the slightest warning of her intention she went like an arrow into the sea. ShellBreaker followed.

'Stop—stop! ' screamed Ginger.

`You needn't worry about them,' sna

s only a mile to the island, and a mile is nothing

to them.'

The 'Scud', relieved of her excess load, rose slowly into the air, becoming more and more buoyant every moment as the water poured back through the leak and fell into the sea. By the time she skimmed low over the reef all the water had gone. Biggles circled over the lagoon. He beckoned to Ginger. `Tell the others that we shall sink if I land on deep water,' he said. 'I'm going to put her down near that sandy part, and beach her. Get out as fast as you can as soon as I touch. The lighter she is the higher up the beach she'll run. We'll get the shell out of her and drag her higher as soon as we're down.' Ginger returned to the others and gave them Biggles's message. 'We'll jump clear as soon as she slows down enough for it to be safe,' he said. 'Stand by. He's going down.'

Biggles brought the big machine in as slowly as he dared. But her keel was no sooner touching the water than water began pouring through the hole. Straight towards the beach the 'Scud' raced, sinking lower and lower into the water, and slowing down appreciably as water poured through the leak.

Fifty yards from the beach, while the machine was still travelling at a good twenty miles an hour, Ginger jumped overboard, and coming to the surface struck out along the creamy wake. Algy and Sandy had followed him, for he could see their heads bobbing up and down just in front of him. The 'Scud' held on her way, and slid smoothly up the shelving coral sand.

By the time the others had reached him Biggles was waist-deep in water at the cabin door dragging out the shell, but as soon as the rest of the party joined him he got back into the cockpit and by opening the throttle in short bursts gradually got the machine up on the sand inch by inch as the shell went overboard. When everything portable had been taken out of the aircraft he switched off and examined the damage. 'Well, I suppose you have to take this sort of thing as it comes, in this part of the world,' he observed philosophically. 'I was fully prepared for the machine to be knocked about a bit on the coral, so I

allowances for fish trying to get on board.'

'The sword came right through into the cabin and missed Sandy by an inch,' Ginger told him.

'You evidently need armour plate in these parts,' smiled Biggles. 'Never mind. It will mean a day's work patching up the hole, but nothing worse, I hope. We can fix it up, well enough to get home, and as far as I can see, now that, we have finished pearling, there's no particular hurry.'

'Confound it! Of course we shall have to go home now that we've lost the diving-kit,'

muttered Ginger in tones of disappointment.

'It looks that way to me,' admitted Sandy. 'I suppose those kids are all right?'

'Yes, here they come,' Ginger told him. 'I've been watching them for some time, otherwise I'd have made Biggles taxi out to pick them up, hole or no hole.'

The two natives were not in the least exhausted by their swim. 'Kaoha,' they called, smiling, as if the whole thing was a huge joke.

'All in the day's work as far as they're concerned,' murmured Sandy. 'Well, we'd better see about heaving all this shell up high and dry. I'll spend to-morrow opening it, while you're mending the ship. The kids will help me.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's the idea,' he said. 'If the oysters open up as well as the last lot we shall have made a good thing out of the trip. I suppose you'll buy a schooner, Sandy, and come back for more?'

Sandy rubbed his chin. 'I'm not so sure,' he said. 'I'd like to, of course, but in the past my luck with pearls hasn't been too good. Something usually happens to upset the blessed apple-cart. I think we'd better see about getting this lot home before we talk some more.'

'All right, you old pessimist,' agreed Biggles. 'By tomorrow evening we ought to be back in Rutuona. Come on, let's get the shell ashore ready for an early start in the morning.'

T THE pink of dawn the following morning saw them all at their respective tasks: Biggles, Ginger, and Algy working on the machine,

cutting a length of sheet-metal and preparing rivets to seal the hole in the flying-boat; and Sandy, with Full Moon and ShellBreaker, opening the oysters with their knives. The two natives were a little way along the beach, where the previous day's catch had been dumped. Every now and then a triumphant yell from one of them, or from Sandy, announced the finding of another pearl. And so the day passed pleasantly enough. By the time the blue of the sky was fading the 'Scud' had been repaired to Biggles's satisfaction, and only a few more oysters remained to be opened. The yield of pearls was not quite as good as the first day's catch, owing to the fact that, although there was a two days' haul, there were not so many oysters, for Sandy had been working in deeper water and progress was consequently slower. Moreover, he had to come up to rest more often. However, he declared that the pearls were well up to average, and although he had not realized his promise about filling his hat with pearls, there were certainly enough to half-fill a hat when the seed pearls were included. He was quite prepared to continue operations with a new divingsuit if the scheme met with the approval of the others. Biggles promised to consider it, for, as Ginger pointed out, there was no reason why they should not go on after they had refitted.

'What about you kids going and catching some more fish for supper?' suggested Sandy, putting the pearls in the cache with the others.

'A fish nearly made a meal of me,' laughed Ginger, with a wink at Full Moon and ShellBreaker, whom he had already thanked for their courageous rescue. Picking up the fishing line he accompanied them to the pool where they had had so much luck on the previous occasion.

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The sky was ablaze with all the colours of a Pacific sunset as Biggles walked across to make the final survey of the 'Scud'. Happening to glance at his instrument-board he stared hard at it for a moment, and then hurried back to where Sandy and Algy were sitting.

'What's wrong?' asked Sandy, after a glance at his face. 'I don't like the look of the barometer,' Biggles told him, with a worried frown.

Sandy glanced round the sky. 'It looks settled enough,' he said. 'I don't know anything about that; I'm talking about the aneroid. It's down to thirty.'

Sandy started. 'What?'

Ì said it was down to thirty, and still falling.'

Sandy rose quickly. 'We'd better get packed up,' he said. 'When the barometer falls like that it means there's going to be a blow, so we'd better get the machine afloat ready for a snappy take-off. I'd feel inclined to take off right away.'

'We can't.'

'Why not?'

Ì don't think we can move the machine until the tide comes in and lifts her.'

'Well, let's try,' returned Sandy, emphatically. 'At Rutuona I don't think we should take any harm, even if a real snorter came along, but if we were caught out here the machine would be pulp in about five minutes. The seas will come right over the reef if it blows hard. Hark at it now.'

There was as yet only a slight breeze, but already the combers were pounding on the outer wall of the reef with a roar like distant thunder. Columns of spray rose-high into the air.

'They're getting it now, somewhere,' muttered Sandy. 'Ì've heard the combers talk like that before.'

'All right,' agreed Biggles. 'Let's get down to the machine and see if we can move her. Where are the kids? It's time they were back. Algy, you'd better go and see if you can find them. Tell them not to trouble about the fish—w:: shan't need it if we're going.'

Algy went off at a run in the direction in which Ginger

had disappeared, while the others hurried to the machine. 85

Biggles put his weight against the bows and pushed, but the 'Scud' did not move. 'She's still resting on the sand,' he said. 'Another ten minutes ought to see the water high enough to lift her off. By James! Take a look at the gap in the reef.'

Sandy looked in that direction. The entrance to the lagoon was a swirling smother of foam. 'Aye, it's coming right enough,' he said.

Ìf we're not away in ten minutes it will be dark before we get to Rutuona, anyway,' went on Biggles anxiously. 'Ì don't like the idea of

night flying over the open sea, or of trying to get down without any landing-lights. That bay is too exposed to be of any use to us; we should have to find somewhere under the lee of the island.'

Sandy said nothing. He was staring along the beach. Biggles turned and saw that it was Algy. He was alone. 'What the dickens are the kids doing?' shouted Sandy.

'We're waiting to push off.'

'I can't find them,' answered Algy.

'What do you mean—you can't find them? They must be on the island somewhere.'

'I've been from one end of it to the other but I couldn't see them,' returned Algy. 'I found Ginger's shoes, and some fish they had evidently caught—but there was no sign of them.'

'Where did you find Ginger's shoes?'

'Just a little way along, on the coral, beside a cove.' Biggles looked at Sandy. 'What the deuce can they be up to?' he muttered. 'Where are they likely to be?'

Sandy shook his head. 'Don't ask me. Ginger won't have come to any harm, though. Shell-Breaker and Full Moon will see to that—they know what they're doing.'

'I hope they do,' replied Biggles. 'Well, we can't go without them. I think the machine's afloat, so we'll get all ready to take off the moment they arrive.'

A quarter of an hour passed. The sun was now going down in a blood-red glow, misty and threatening; only the rim of it remained above the horizon. Presently it disappeared in the sea. Darkness fell.

'Well, that knocks on the head any idea of going tonight,' said Biggles quietly. 'What's happened to those kids? I'm getting worried about them.'

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'Something's going to happen to the machine if we don't do something about it,' cut in Algy. 'Loa' at the reef.'

For the first time since their arrival seas were sweeping right over the

reef into the lagoon. Angry ripples surged across the normally still water, so that the machine, now afloat, moved up and down uneasily.

'We'd better get some more anchors on her,' said Biggles seriously, as he watched the '

Scud' rocking.

'Half a dozen wouldn't hold her if it's a real blow,' returned Sandy. 'She'll tear herself to pieces in no time.'

'There's nothing else we can do,' answered Biggles. 'Get some lumps of coral, the biggest you can lift, and we'll make extra anchors fore and aft. We've plenty of rope.'

'As you say, that's the only thing we can do,' agreed Sandy. 'I think you'd better go and have another look for those kids, Algy,' went on Biggles. '

Sandy and I will fix the machine up.'

Algy nodded and hurried away.

It was half an hour before he returned, by which time the 'Scud' was riding uneasily at six anchors, any one of which would have been sufficient to hold her in an ordinary sea. 'I can't see a sign of them anywhere,' he said. 'Ginger's shoes are still on the coral. He must have taken them off to bathe. I'm sorry to say that I'm afraid something serious has happened.'

Biggles was silent for a moment. 'Yes,' he said, slowly. 'Something has happened or they'

'd be back before now. Something happened to them in the water. It's hard to believe that they can all be drowned. On the other side of the island, in the open sea, they might have got carried away, but-I can't see that happening in the lagoon.'

'I wonder if a shark could have got them?' muttered Sandy.

'Not all of them, surely? At least one of them would get back to the shore—not that I think Ginger would go far away from it after his recent experience. The only thing I can think of is that they went off to the reef, and were either dragged off by a big wave, or tried to swim and were unable to get back. Well, we can't do anything about it. If it were daylight we might fly round and look for them, but in this

darkness we shouldn't see anything unless we were

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on the water, and taxi-ing is out of the question. I couldn't get the machine through those seas pouring into the en trance to the lagoon—not that it would be of any use if I could. She wouldn't live for a minute in the sea that's running outside. Hark at it! '

The deep incessant boom of the mighty combers told its own story. There was something frightening about the way they hurled themselves on the reef with a power that caused the island to tremble. The palms were beginning to lash to and fro in the wind.

'Well, it's no use standing here,' said Biggles at last. 'It's not much use doing anything else that I can see,' murmured Sandy.

'We'll make another search,' decided Biggles. 'It's better than doing nothing. Algy, you take the eastern end of the island. Sandy, you take the middle. I'll do the western end.'

So they parted, each heading for his allotted beat, calling loudly the names of the missing. Biggles was away for an hour. He got back to find that Sandy and Algy had already returned. He did not trouble to ask them if they had any news, for it was obvious that their search had been as unsuccessful as his. 'Well, that's about all we can do,' he said bitterly. 'We'll stand by until the morning. If the machine looks like being damaged we'll try to get her off and head for Rutuona. I can cruise round until it's light enough to see to land. I think we've enough petrol. Otherwise, from what you've told us, Sandy, if the machine is smashed up we're likely to spend the rest of our lives here.'

The night passed slowly, but at long last the eastern sky began to turn pale; and with the coming of dawn the fury of the storm increased. Huge seas were now sweeping right across the reef and flooding into the lagoon. Waves lashed the coral beach which a few hours before had been so silent. The 'Scud' strained at her moorings, throwing herself about like a terrified animal.

'She won't stand much more of that,' said Biggles, grimly. 'Stand fast, and I'll go and have a look at the barometer.' With difficulty he waded waist-deep to the cockpit. He glanced at the instrument board and came back—or, rather, was thrown back by the sea.

'What is it?' asked Sandy.



`Twenty-nine.'

`Sweet spirit of Scotland, then it's coming,' declared Sandy. 'If we don't go now we're here for good,' returned Biggles. 'Look at the lagoon. I couldn't have believed that such a sea could have got up in so short a time. And it's getting worse. I'm by no means sure that I can get the machine off, even now, but it's now or never. Well, what shall we do? You've a say in the matter as well as me.'

`We'd better go. We can always come back later and look for the kids,' voted Sandy. '

There's no sense in just standing here and watching the machine break up in front of our eyes. She'll start dragging those anchors presently, or else tear herself to pieces. The sea is getting worse, and if I know anything about it it's going to be a lot worse before it's better. I've had one long spell on this island and I don't want another, but that's what it will mean if we lose the machine.'

'All right,' said Biggles. 'Get aboard. Be careful, there's the devil of an undertow. It nearly swept me off my feet.'

Fighting their way through the waves they managed to get to the machine and drag themselves on board. Biggles started the engines. 'Cut the ropes fore and aft,' he shouted above the din, for what with the noise of the engines, the crash of the waves, and the lashing palms, it was no use speaking in a normal voice. 'You get to the bows, Algy. Yours will be the last rope. Don't cut till I give the signal. I'll wait for her to swing round with her nose into the sea. Right, Sandy.'

Sandy's knife came down on the last rope that held the machine by the stem. Instantly the

'Scud' swung round, dragging at the single rope that held her by the bows. She bucked so violently that Algy needed all his strength to hold on.

`Right!' yelled Biggles, and opened the throttle.

Algy's knife came down across the rope. It parted with a twang that could be heard above the gale. He clambered aft, and fell headlong into the cabin as the 'Scud' rose to the next wave. He lay where he fell, for it was impossible to stand. The 'Scud' was racing through a blinding cloud of spray

that made it impossible to see anything else, so that Biggles 89

had to fly by feel alone. Twice he was sure they were gone, as the machine plunged into a trough, but each time she rose miraculously to the next wave. Then a sea struck her sideways across the bows, and she yawed into a trough. There was no question of turning. The machine would not answer to her controls in such conditions. But a momentary lull gave Biggles a chance, and he took it. He raced the 'Scud' straight along the bottom of the trough, and as the next wave rolled towards him he jerked the stick back, knowing that if the machine did not rise they were all doomed. Not until all seemed lost did the machine unstick. She staggered off the water, the wave snatching at her keel as it broke under her. The next moment the machine was climbing up through a cloud of spray that hid the reef from sight.

Biggles settled himself back in his seat and tightened the safety belt. To say that he actually headed for Rutuona would not be strictly true. The wind was across, so in order to reach the island he had to turn his bows towards the open ocean and drift sideways. He noticed that the barometer was down to 28.50.

Rutuona came into view, an oasis of whirling trees in a white-flecked ocean, and he looked anxiously for a landing-place. As far as he could see there was only one, a narrow strip of water that ran far inland between two rugged cliffs, like a Norwegian fiord. He nosed the machine towards it, and was thankful to see that the protected water was comparatively calm, although the air was full of flying debris, palm-fronds and the like. There was also a fair amount on the surface of the water. How much of it was soft enough to give under their keel, and how much was solid, it was impossible to determine. But it was no longer a matter of saving the machine. Their lives were in peril, and in such circumstances he was prepared to lose the machine if they could all get ashore safely. Exploring the creek with his eyes he determined to take the machine to the far end of it, where a scree ran right down to the water's edge, forming a natural slipway. He brought the machine in under full throttle, and even so his ground-speed was negligible. The keel struck the water; the hull veered sideways as a wing-float caught in a tangle of floating bushes, and they came to rest in a still 90

larger tangle that had been caught up by a projecting crag. More debris was floating towards the place, so that in a few seconds the 'Scud' was hemmed in by it. The bottom of the scree was about twenty yards away.

Biggles switched off and turned to the others. 'Well, here we are,' he said evenly. 'And here we look like staying for a bit,' he added. 'I shouldn't have minded had it not been for the kids. Still, I suppose it's no use talking about that now. We couldn't do more than we did. We'll go back and look for them again as soon as this wind drops a bit.'

It's going to take us some time to get out of here,' declared Sandy. 'It will mean a couple of days' work cutting a channel through these bushes, unless we can get to Roaring Wave and persuade him to lend us some labourers. I don't think there will be any difficulty about that. I reckon we are about six miles from the village.'

Biggles nodded. 'About that,' he said. 'I think we'd better try to get along, and see what Roaring Wave says.'

If you don't mind we'll stay here until the wind drops,' grunted Sandy. 'We should get our skulls stove in by falling coconuts before we'd gone a hundred yards. A coconut grove is no place in a gale of wind, believe me.'

Of course,' agreed Biggles. 'I forgot that. As you say, we shall just have to sit here until the wind drops. I hope nothing falls on top of us; half the greenstuff on the island seems to be blowing over our heads. By the way, where did you put the pearls?'

Sandy blinked. 'The pearls?' he stammered. 'Didn't you bring 'em?'

'No, I left it to you.'

Sandy's face was a picture. He shook his head sadly. 'I always was an unlucky son of a gun when there were pearls about,' he muttered miserably. 'They must be still under the rock where we left them.'

Biggles dodged a whirling palm-frond. 'Pretty good,' was all he said, but there was more than a suspicion of sarcasm in his voice.

H AD Ginger told the others of the existence of the fairy grotto they would have guessed at once where he was, in which case their attempts to get into touch with him might well have ended in tragedy. So, although it was hard to believe at the time, it was really just as well that Ginger had withheld the information.

He had no intention of going to the grotto when, with Full Moon and Shell-Breaker, he had set off at Sandy's request to get some fish. Naturally, they made their way to, the same cove where they had done so well on the previous occasion, and they soon had a good

supply of fish flapping about on the coral. So quickly were they supplied with all the fish they were likely to need that Full Moon's suggestion of a swim in the pool was promptly taken up, and they were soon all splashing about in the pure water. In these circumstances a visit to the grotto was almost automatic. Full Moon shouted that she was going, and took a header. The others were on her track before the splash had subsided, and together they swam through the short cave into the fairyland beyond. Laughing from sheer lightheartedness they climbed up on the ledge where they had sat before, and reaching down kicked spray into the air with startling results, for it flashed like myriad blue sparks. However, the best fun must come to an end, and for a time they sat talking in low tones about their exquisite surroundings. At last Ginger got up. 'It's time we were getting back,' he said. 'In fact; we've stayed too long already. I have an idea Sandy was waiting to fry those fish for supper. The sun must be going down. The water is turning mauve. Incidentally, I believe it is getting rough outside; look at the ripples coming in.'

For a moment or two longer they stood watching the  
colour-transformation that was taking place before their

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eyes; then Ginger balanced himself on the ledge, hands together, ready to plunge. He was looking over his shoulder at Shell-Breaker, who he suspected from previous experience might push him in, and so he did not see what Full Moon saw. Her wild scream filled the cave with sound.

Ginger spun round, not a little alarmed. 'What's the matter?' he cried. Full Moon pointed at the water. 'Mako!' she said.

Ginger turned again, and saw an enormous triangular fin projecting above the water just inside the entrance to the cave. It was moving forward, slowly. For a full minute Ginger could only stare, stunned to speechlessness. It was the first time he had seen a shark inside the lagoon, and his skin curled with horror at the realization that a few minutes earlier he must have been swimming about in close proximity to the monster. 'What are we going to do?' he cried in dismay.

Shell-Breaker made a grimace. 'Me stay,' he said. 'But the mako may not go for a week.'

Shell-Breaker shrugged his shoulders. 'Me stay,' he repeated resolutely. Ginger looked back at the shark. Its back projected out of the water

not ten feet from where he stood. The creature was so huge that it seemed almost to fill the pool inside the cave. In the confined space it looked larger than a whale. They were safe where they were, for the ledge was between two and three feet above water-level, but to put hand or foot in the water would obviously be committing suicide in a very unpleasant manner. '

'We're trapped,' thought Ginger, aghast. 'We're trapped as effectively as if the cave had closed up.' Which in a way was true. 'Why has the brute come in here?' he asked ShellBreaker.

'Big storm at sea, maybe hurricane,' replied Shell-Breaker. 'When big fella sea come fish swim in lagoon and stick head in hole.'

'What can we do about it? You know more about this sort of thing than I do.'

Shell-Breaker merely made another despairing gesture. 'Me stay,' he said yet again.

'Can't we kill it, or drive it out somehow?'

Aue! No kill. Outside plenty water, me kill. In cave, no kill. Mako plenty kai-kai me.'

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Ginger stared again at the shark's huge dorsal fin, standing upright like the sail of a boat.

'Heavens above, what will the others think when we don't go back?' he muttered. Full Moon squatted down on the coral. She picked up a loose piece and hurled it at the shark, screaming what was obviously an insult in her own language. The creature moved its great body languidly, showing the dirty grey of its stomach.

'Maybe you pray white man's god,' suggested Shell-Breaker thoughtfully. Ginger said nothing. He was thinking. He saw the mauve tint of the water deepening and knew that the sun had nearly set. He visualized the others coming to look for them, searching the island from end to end, but there was nothing he could do to relieve their anxiety. At first he found himself regretting that he had not told Biggles about the grotto, but on second thoughts he was glad he had not, for in that case Biggles would certainly have sought them there and, not knowing the cause of the delay, would have encountered the shark.

Ginger had been in many difficult and dangerous situations, but he could not imagine anything more fantastic than the one in which he now found himself. He had been locked up more than once, but never before had watch been kept by such a terrible guardian. The thought that appalled him was that the shark might stay there for days, a week, or even longer, in which case they were all likely to starve to death, for there was no question of entering the water while the shark was there. In the fast-fading light he saw that there was now a definite movement in the pool, which previously had been absolutely motionless. The water surged to and fro with a regular movement that could only mean that a big sea was running outside. 'I think you are right about the storm,' he told Shell-Breaker.

'Storm pass, mako go,' replied Shell-Breaker briefly. 'How long do you think the storm will last?'

'Two day—three day—maybe.' Shell-Breaker held up all his fingers. He seemed resigned to their predicament.

Ginger leaned back against the wall of the grotto and watched Full Moon relieving her feelings by pelting the shark with lumps of coral; but the great fish did not seem to mind in the least. Swiftly it grew dark. They were, of

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course, without any means of illumination, so it was now certain that they would have to remain in the cave all night at any rate, for even if the shark departed they would have no means of knowing it until daylight came again. The darkness was intense. The only sound was the eerie gurgling of the rising and falling water. At last Ginger sat down and cupped his chin in the palms of his hands, prepared to pass what he suspected was likely to be the longest night of his life.

In this he was correct. The night seemed like eternity. Indeed, the first reflection of morning light was so long in coming that he began seriously to wonder if the mouth of the cave had fallen in. It was possible, he reflected, for the movement of the water was now much more pronounced, and it was clear that a storm was raging outside. Not once did he close his eyes, although he longed to. More than once he found himself nodding in spite of the discomfort of his position, and when that happened he struck the coral with his hands to keep himself awake, for he was terrified of dozing and falling from his perch into the water. In the end the thing became a nightmare, and he hardly knew whether he was awake or dreaming. But at long last the

first suspicion of light came through the tunnel, and he breathed a sigh of relief to know that the passage was still open. But the light was no longer blue; it was grey, dull, and depressing. He looked along the ledge and saw that both Full Moon and Shell-Breaker were sleeping peacefully, as if there was no such thing as danger, and he envied their happy-go-lucky natures. He awakened them and directed their attention to the water. Side by side they sat and watched the grey light spreading further into the cave, until such time that it was possible to see all the water inside the grotto. At last the matter was no longer in doubt. The shark had gone. Ginger could have shouted with relief and satisfaction, but his optimism received a rude check when Shell-Breaker announced calmly that the mako might still be in the cave. That, Ginger realized, was a possibility that would always exist, for it was impossible to see in the cave without entering the water. They waited for a little while, but when the shark did not reappear Shell-Breaker stood up. 'Me go,' he announced casually.

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'But suppose you meet mako in the cave?' asked Ginger.

'Me fight. Kill mako maybe. Maybe mako eat me.'

Ginger shook his head in horrible indecision, realizing that he would have no means of knowing what had happened inside the cave unless he himself went in and found out.

'Me go,' said Shell-Breaker again. 'You stay. If mako gone, me come back.'

Ginger did not like the idea of Shell-Breaker taking such a desperate risk on his behalf, but such was his fear of the shark that he raised no objection, comforting himself with the thought that even if he went with the native, and they encountered the shark, he would be more likely to get in the way than be of any assistance. Full Moon said nothing, but the instant Shell-Breaker had dived into the water she put her knife in her pareu in such a manner that she would be able to get at it easily, and followed him. With what trepidation Ginger watched the two forms disappear into the cave can be better imagined than described. He became a victim of every sort of pessimism. He fancied that the swirl of the water suddenly increased, as if a struggle was going on inside the cave. He imagined that he could see dark shadows moving just inside the entrance. The minutes passed with nerve-racking slowness. Then one of the shadows materialized and sped towards the ledge, and a moment later Shell-Breaker's head appeared

above the water. 'Come—come plenty quick!' he shouted.

'Has the mako gone?' cried Ginger, the muscles of his face stiff with fear.

'Come quick, keep close, plenty big wave,' was all Shell-Breaker answered, and kicking off from the coral with his feet, he streaked again towards the cave. Ginger braced himself. Never in all his experience had he hated anything as much as the task that lay before him. But Shell-Breaker had gone, and clearly expected him to follow, so with a shudder of apprehension he dived in and struck out in the wake of the vague form which he could see some distance in front of him. Every moment he was prepared to see the shark loom up, but even this fear was soon half forgotten in a more pressing peril.

Unseen currents were forcing him against the coral side

of the cave. Twice he was carried back nearly to the grotto 96

by a surging flood of water, and then sucked towards the open lagoon by the tremendous backwash, as helpless as if he had been a piece of seaweed. He could only fight to keep himself clear of the rough coral, which would have torn his flesh had he collided with it, but at last an unusually vicious backwash shot him clear into the open and he struggled to the surface. He was almost spent, and clutched at the shoulder of Shell-Breaker who was waiting for him. The native at once struck out for the coral bank, against which waves were dashing in impotent fury.

How he got up the bank Ginger never knew. He had no clear recollection of anything except Shell-Breaker pushing him from behind and Full Moon dragging him up by the hair. Finally, a mighty wave cast them all up together, and they landed clear of the breakers bleeding from a dozen scratches. Shell-Breaker was in even worse case than Ginger, in spite of his ability in the water. Staggering to his feet he pointed to the centre of the cove, where, as the water rose and fell, a dark fin projected. Ginger was nearly sick with horror when he realized that the shark must have been there all the time, and he had been within twenty yards of it.

'Mako leave cave—plenty big fella sea,' muttered Shell-Breaker. Looking about him Ginger perceived for the first time the full force of the storm. The wind, which had now reached gale force, clutched at his body, and beat the palms so far over that their fronds swept the ground. The reef was hidden under monstrous seas that broke with a



roar like thunder and flung spray a hundred feet into the air. The surface of the lagoon was being whipped into a smother of foam. Overhead the sky was flat grey. Ginger's heart sank, and he uttered a cry of despair, for he knew that the 'Scud' could not live in such a gale. The force of the cambers crashing on the beach was such that he knew without looking that if the flying-boat was still there it must be a tangle of fabric, wire, and three-ply. What were the others doing? He shouted to Full Moon and ShellBreaker that he was going, and bending forward into the wind he set off at a laborious run towards the camp. He soon came within sight of it—or of where it had been. There was nothing there. Only a pile of fallen palms,

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and a few scattered wooden cases, showed where the camp had been. Of Biggles, Algy, or Sandy there was no sign. Ginger let out a cry of despair. 'They've gone!' he shouted. Heedless of the protests of ShellBreaker and Full Moon, he forced his way along the beach just out of reach of the waves, looking for what he dreaded to find—the remains of the mangled flying-boat; but to his infinite relief he could see no signs of it. 'They must have gone when the storm started,' he told himself hopefully, and in order to confirm that they had not taken refuge elsewhere he dragged himself up the incline towards the centre of the island, ducking and dodging as coconuts and palm-fronds whirled past him. Not until he reached the ridge did he realize the full fury of the hurricane, for it was coming from that side of the island. The sea was a succession of giant cambers, their tops torn into spray, which made it impossible to see more than a few hundred yards. The waves, rearing high into the air, flung themselves towards the place where he stood. Already the whole side of the island was submerged, the waves breaking far above the place where their first load of shell had been stacked. As for the shell, it had all been swept away. More terrifying still, the whole island shook under the impact of the rollers, and in many places water-spouts shot high into the air from coral that was above the water-line. At first Ginger could not understand what caused this; then he realized that the sea was pouring under the island, into caves such as the one he had just left, and under the tremendous pressure was bursting through flaws in the coral. Every now and then a mass of coral would be flung into the air, as if by an explosion. Finding it difficult to remain on his feet, Ginger dropped on to his hands and knees, and clung to some lowgrowing shrubs to prevent himself from being blown away. Not until a mighty comber broke and raced up to the spot where he knelt, so that the foam surged right across the ridge, did he realize that he was in peril. Vaguely to his memory came something Sandy had said about big seas

sweeping right across the islands. He turned his head to see what the others were doing and saw Shell-Breaker forcing his way towards him.

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As soon as he saw that Ginger was looking at him the Marquesan beckoned vigorously, and pointed to the palms. Knowing that there must be a reason for this Ginger made his way towards him, clutching at such handholds as he could find to check his headlong progress. He could no longer see Full Moon. Shell-Breaker's mouth was opening and shutting, and he knew that he was shouting, but he could hear nothing; the wind was snatching the words from his lips as fast as they were formed. The native, realizing the futility of attempting to speak, could only point towards a mass of coral, under which he crouched, and there. Ginger joined him.

The Marquesan cupped his hands round his mouth and shouted into Ginger's ear. 'When wind drop, big seas come.'

Ginger reversed the process. 'Bigger than these?'

'Yes, waves come right over island.' As if to confirm Shell-Breaker's words a giant wave did at that moment sweep right across the ridge and reach the lagoon on the far side.

'Come!' shouted Shell-Breaker.

Ginger followed him to the palms. The nuts had ceased to fly, for they were all on the ground. He saw Full Moon clinging to one of the thickest boles. She had evidently been busy, for a series of notches had been cut in the smooth trunk nearly up to the swaying crown. She still gripped her knife in her hand. Round her body was a length of rope which she must have found on the site of the camp. She was now knotting it into a double coil.

When she saw Ginger and Shell-Breaker coming she arranged the coils round her body and the trunk of the palm, and indicated that Ginger was to go with her. Ginger, still not quite sure what was expected of him, joined the girl at the palm. She did not speak. She pushed him inside the coil of rope, and, starting to climb, motioned him to do the same. So, with the rope round both their bodies, and the trunk of the palm between them, they began to mount.

To Ginger it was a nightmare journey. The violent swaying of the palm, the tearing of the wind, the noise, and the flying debris were beyond human imagination; and as they mounted slowly towards the

the imminent prospect of a fall into the depths below did nothing to allay Ginger's fears. Full Moon glanced upwards, and evidently decided that they were close enough to the great fronds to make further progress doubly dangerous, for she started tightening the rope, lashing them both to the bole. Ginger could only admire the efficiency with which she went about a task which would have made many experienced sailors pause. Finally, she took her knife and hacked furiously at the trunk immediately above them, so that the chips whirled away in the wind. When she was half-way through it a tremendous gust tore away the crown bodily, and the green mass disappeared into the driving spindrift. The palm, relieved of its dragging weight, at once leapt to a vertical position, and without offering any appreciable resistance to the wind remained more or less stationary. A minute later Ginger saw the wisdom of her action in cutting off the top of the palm, when another one, not far away, snapped off short just above the roots and disappeared into the seething lagoon. Another followed it soon after. Looking down he saw that the whole island was now buried under a raging sea of water, as the breakers swept it from side to side. Turning his head with difficulty he could just make out Shell-Breaker. He had lashed himself to another palm with his pareu, and was hacking at the crown as Full Moon had done. Suddenly it was whipped away, and he was left clinging to the stump, like a bear up a pole. His face twisted into a smile when he saw Ginger looking at him, and Ginger smiled back, although his mood was anything but gay. 'My gosh! these kids have got some courage,' he thought admiringly.

They could do nothing except cling to the tree, and so to some extent prevent the rope from chafing them. An hour passed, two hours, and then, amazingly, there was a sudden lull. The wind died away altogether. Immediately overhead there appeared a round patch of blue sky.

Ginger shouted in relief, but Full Moon shook her head. 'Plenty wind bymeby,' she said. '

Centre of storm. Soon he pass, then plenty wind.'

Ginger understood vaguely what she meant, and soon discovered that she was right, for the lull, which was the centre of the hurricane, did not last long. The blue sky 100

disappeared, and the wind returned with as much violence as before. Hour after hour it raged, its force slowly weakening as the centre of the hurricane swept on over the ocean, but at a time that Ginger judged to be about four o'clock the gale had dropped to no more than a steady breeze punctuated by occasional gusts. He was more than a little thankful, for' he was exhausted with the strain. He was hungry and thirsty as well as tired, for he had had neither food nor sleep for many hours. His thirst was aggravated by the salt spray which still filled the air, but there was as yet no question of leaving his refuge, for as the wind dropped so did the size of the mighty Pacific rollers increase. The whole island rocked under their weight as they streamed across the ridge, carrying all before them. The sand and shell-dust which formed the subsoil, and the herbage that grew on it, were swept away, leaving the foundation of coral exposed. Piles of sand, stone, and seaweed were flung up where before there had been none. Water boiled up through the coral as the seas drove under it. Only a few palms remained standing. Not until evening did the clouds break and the crimson orb of the sun appear, far down in the west. By that time the waves were subsiding. By nightfall only an occasional breaker managed to reach the ridge, and by then its force was too far spent for it to be dangerous, so Ginger, with Full Moon's approval, made his way stiffly to the ground. He was encrusted with salt; his hair and eyebrows were stiff with it. He ached in every limb. The others joined him, but they did not share his depression. As far as they were concerned the storm had passed and they had survived, so there was no need to worry any more about it. Even when Ginger pointed out that all the fresh water on the island would certainly be tainted with salt, they only laughed.

Slowly, they made their way through a scene of utter ruin to the site of the camp. It was by no means easy to find, for the whole shape of the island had altered. Masses of coral had disappeared entirely, while sand had been torn from one place and flung up in another. Palms and the fronds that had been stripped from them lay about in wild confusion. Huge masses of seaweed and shells of all shapes 102

and sizes were strewn about over everything. Over them crawled countless crabs, seaslugs, and other marine creatures, all making their way back to the sea from which they had been thrown.

Dragging the trailing seaweed aside Ginger groped about on the site of the camp and managed to find a few odds and ends. A case of bully beef had been wedged into a lump of coral; a few tins of condensed milk, biscuits and similar commodities lay half-buried in the sand. Borrowing Full Moon's knife he cut open a tin of beef and another of

biscuits, but he soon found that his mouth was too parched to eat, so he made his way to the spring from where they had obtained the fresh water. It was no longer there. The spot was buried under many tons of sand.

Ginger looked at Shell-Breaker with startled eyes. 'If we can't get water we shall soon die of thirst,' he said.

Full Moon only laughed. 'No die,' she said. 'Plenty drink,' she went on, picking up one of the many coconuts that lay on the ground. Taking her knife she cut the top off one with an expert slash, and passed it to Ginger, who was far too thirsty to be embarrassed by his exhibition of ignorance. He emptied the shell and picked up another. Never had anything tasted so delicious as the milky juice. The other two were also drinking, and he derived consolation from the realization that they would not starve or die of thirst while the nuts held out.

For a long time they sat in silence, nibbling a curious meal of bully beef, biscuit, and coconut. When it was finished Ginger gazed out across the moonlit sea for a little while, wondering what had become of Biggles, and deploring the tragic ending of their expedition. Presently, looking round at the others, he saw that they were both lying down, sleeping peacefully. 'I might as well join them,' he thought, and stretched himself out on the damp sand.

GINGER was the first to wake in the morning. He opened his eyes and lay still for a minute or two staring at the blue sky, worried by a sense of something wrong. Then, in a flash, he remembered everything. He did not move. There seemed to be no reason why he should. The air was fresh; the breeze was no more than a caress, and the warm sun soothed his tired body. So he lay still on his back, hands under his head, trying to get events into some sort of order. What had happened to the others, he reasoned correctly, was this. When he and the two natives did not return, Biggles would at once make a search. In the ordinary way no great harm would have been done by their enforced absence, but the coming of the hurricane altered everything. In order to save the machine Biggles had been obliged to abandon them, and fly the 'Scud' to a safer anchorage, in which case he would soon reappear. In fact, he might come back at any moment. He did not believe that Biggles had been taken unawares by the hurricane, and the 'Scud'

destroyed. However, the fact remained that he and the two Marquesans were marooned, and could do nothing but await the arrival of a rescue party. That sooner or later it would come he had no doubt.

Full Moon opened her, eyes and smiled up at him. Stretching, she sat up, her eyes wandering out over the lagoon. Suddenly she stopped, tense, rigid. Into her eyes came the shadow of fear. 'Àtanelli, he come,' she hissed.

Ginger sat up as if he had been propelled by a spring, and followed the direction of her eyes. A schooner, obviously in a bad way if not actually in distress, was making her way carefully through the entrance to the lagoon under a few strips of ragged sail. That it was the Avarata was beyond doubt. For a second Ginger stared at 104

it, hardly able to believe his eyes or make up his mind what to do. First of all he awakened Shell-Breaker by striking him on the leg, which happened to be the only part of his body within reach. 'Shell-Breaker, wake up!' he said tersely. 'Àtanelli is here.'

Shell-Breaker sat up, wide awake on the instant. He gazed out across the lagoon. 'Aue!

Plenty bad,' he said.

'Don't move, they may not have seen us,' said Ginger. 'Let me think. What is the best thing to do? If he doesn't know we are here he may soon go.'

Shell-Breaker shook his head. 'No go,' he said. 'Avarata been in a hurricane. Plenty damage. He stay long time, maybe.'

'In which case they'll come ashore for water and nuts,' reflected Ginger. He thought swiftly, looking about for some place of concealment. 'Let us get over the other side of the ridge,' he said at last, in desperation, and began squirming through the debris towards the far beach. Every moment he expected to hear a shout announcing that they were discovered, but if they were, no sign of it was given, and they crawled over the ridge where, of course, they could not be seen from the lagoon. As soon as they were out of view of the schooner Ginger got up and ran to the farthest end of the island and, finding a hiding-place among the coral, turned to watch the schooner. It was just dropping anchor in the lagoon. The tattered sails lay about the deck. Over them walked the Solomon Island boys, in a listless fashion, as though they were exhausted. Castanelli was leaning against the wheel.

Having nothing else to do Ginger lay still, his eyes on the schooner, anxious to know what Castanelli would do next. There was just a chance, he thought, that the Corsican might depart after a short rest,

for the sea outside the lagoon was going down fast. But this hope was soon squashed. Having got the deck of the schooner more or less shipshape Castanelli ordered a dinghy to be lowered—his voice reached the watchers clearly—and he was soon being rowed to the island by two members of his crew. Ginger bit his lip. 'I'm afraid we're in for a bit of bad luck,' he said. 'Castanelli must know that this is the island near the pearl-bed; even if he doesn't recognize it he must 105

know that it is somewhere in this district. He may have got the taint of rotting oysters either before or after the hurricane blew up; maybe it brought him here.'

Neither Full Moon nor Shell-Breaker had anything to say about this, so, continuing watching, they saw Castanelli step ashore and commence a systematic search along the lagoon side of the island. He soon found the wrecked camp, and stood smoking a cigar while his boys dragged the debris aside to disclose the remains of the stores. Suddenly he stopped and picked something up, something that flashed in the sunlight. Ginger knew what it was. The shell that had been stacked on that side of the island had been strewn all over the place; he remembered seeing several among the seaweed. Castanelli had found one, and Ginger realized that it would settle any doubts in his mind about the last occupants of the island. Mortified, but helpless to prevent it, Ginger watched Castanelli show the shell to his boys before tossing it on one side. Fortunately, it did not occur to Ginger that the pearls might still be in the cache, or his depression would have been worse, for the Corsican was standing within a yard of the spot where they had been buried.

Castanelli stayed on the island for about an hour, at the end of which time he got back into the dinghy and was rowed to the schooner, which lay about a hundred yards from the shore. Again Ginger hoped fervently that he would go, for now that the island was devastated there appeared to be no reason why he should stay; but no move was made to suggest that Castanelli had any such intention.

All the day the schooner remained at anchor, its captain sometimes on deck supervising the repair of gear and sails, and sometimes out of sight below. As the day wore on Ginger became more and more worried. But he was still convinced that Biggles and the others had departed as soon as the hurricane had announced its approach, in which case they would be certain to return. He knew that they would be anxious about him. For some reason or other it did not enter his head that he had been given up as lost. What alarmed him most was the thought that Biggles might return at any moment. Apart from the

presence of the schooner, the surface of the lagoon was strewn with obstacles, palmtrunks and the like, which Biggles might not see, and if he struck one in landing the aircraft would unquestionably be wrecked. But when the sun began to sink into the western ocean and there was still no sign of the '

Scud' Ginger knew that there was little likelihood of his returning that day, and for the first time serious doubts entered his mind about the flying-boat's survival of the hurricane. It might easily have been blown out to sea, he thought miserably. On the other hand, it might have reached Rutuona safely, and Biggles was only waiting to make sure that the weather had cleared before he returned, in which case he ought to try to stop him. He turned to Shell-Breaker. 'How long would it take us to get from here to Rutuona in a small boat?' he asked.

Shell-Breaker thought for a moment. 'One day—two day, maybe. Depend on sea and wind.'

Ginger pointed to the dinghy, now moored under the schooner's counter. 'How long in that boat?' he asked.

Shell-Breaker, by words and actions, indicated that if they started at nightfall it might be possible to reach Rutuona by the morning of the following day. In reply to another question by Ginger he declared that he would be able to find his way across the intervening ocean.

'Then if Atanelli no go by night, we steal boat,' announced Ginger. The others agreed that they were ready to put the plan into execution, so Ginger told Shell-Breaker to gather some nuts together, which they would pick up after they had succeeded in getting the dinghy. It looked simple enough, he thought, as he gazed across the lagoon at the schooner. Castanelli would hardly consider it necessary to set a watch in such a place. The swim was only a short one, and under cover of darkness the removal of the dinghy ought to present neither difficulty nor danger. Ginger's only fear, although he did not mention this to the others, was that the shark might still be in the lagoon. The idea of swimming in water that harboured such horrors as he had already seen became more and more repugnant to him; however, he was prepared to take the risk. The short twilight faded and darkness fell; only a single light showed where the schooner lay at anchor. Ginger did not move at once; he was anxious to put the plan into execution as quickly as possible because the sooner they



started the earlier they would reach Rutuona, but he decided that it would be wise to give the schooner time to settle down for the night. He could tell by the diminishing noise of the breakers on the reef that the sea was still going down, for which he was thankful. He was fond of the water, but not so much as to make him look forward with pleasure to a trip in an open boat across a stretch of ocean during the hurricane season. At last he rose to his feet. The moon had not yet risen, but the stars were like lamps hanging from the blue dome of heaven, and provided ample light for their purpose. Indeed, more would be dangerous. At the last moment he turned to Full Moon. 'There is no need for us all to go,' he said quietly. 'You gather all the nuts you can carry and take them out to the place where the reef joins the island.' He pointed to the spot. 'As soon as we've got the boat we'll come round and pick you up.'

Shell-Breaker agreed that this was a good idea, so they set off, leaving Full Moon to make her own way to the rendezvous. They reached the edge of the lagoon and waded quietly out into deep water, where they began to swim, using a steady breast-stroke that made the least noise. In a few minutes the dark silhouette of the schooner could be seen, and it was possible to make out that the solitary light came from a porthole—probably Castanelli's cabin, thought Ginger. As they drew nearer their strokes became slower and their approach more cautious. Shell-Breaker found a piece of driftwood, and resting his hands on it pushed it slowly in front of him, paddling with his feet only. Ginger looked for a similar piece, but unable to find it had to go on without any cover. His toes curled with shock when he saw a long black object on the water in front of him, but to his unspeakable relief he discovered it was only the bole of a floating palm. They were now only a few yards from the schooner's side, and from the dinghy. All remained quiet. Not a soul was in sight. Ginger swam quietly to the boat, rested his hands on the stern for a moment, listening; then, hearing nothing, he pulled himself into it. It lurched under his weight, so in order to balance himself he dropped forward on his hands and knees. He landed on something soft, something that moved violently as soon as his hands

touched it, and too late he knew what it was. A man had been lying in the dinghy all the time, probably asleep. He awoke with a wild yell. Ginger tried desperately to get back into the water, but a pair of vice-like hands gripped his throat and he was forced down under a hot, reeking body. What happened after that he did not know, for he was too near to suffocation. Subconsciously he was aware of shouts and a

general uproar; then something crashed against his jaw and the world exploded in a flash of blinding light. He could not have been unconscious for many minutes, for when he came round he was lying on the deck of the-schooner, in an area of light cast by a lantern, the centre of several spectators. Blinking, he raised himself on his right hand, and looking up saw Castanelli grinning down at him. The others were his crew of shock-haired native boys.

`Get up,' ordered Castanelli, in his soft, purring voice. Ginger did as he was told. He was still somewhat dazed and his brain was whirling with shock, but the thought uppermost in his mind was: What had happened to Shell-Breaker?

He could not see him, so he assumed that he had escaped, in which case he could only hope that he had not been seen, otherwise his capture was only a matter of time when daylight came.

`So we meet again—yes?' sneered Castanelli.

Ginger did not answer.

`Where are your pals?' asked Castanelli coldly. 'I wish I knew,' returned Ginger bitterly.

`You speak lies wiz me, eh?'

Ginger shook his head. 'No,' he said wearily. 'They disappeared in the hurricane. That's all I know. I was trapped in a cave by a shark at the other end of the island so I don't know what happened. I only just had time to climb into a palm before the seas swept everything.'

Castanelli was silent for a moment. The obvious sincerity of Ginger's words, and the tone of voice in which he said them, evidently made an impression on the Corsican. 'Get plenty pearls?' he asked smoothly.

`We got a few,' admitted Ginger, who saw no reason to

lie. 'We might have got more but a swordfish holed our

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ship and we had to jettison the diving-gear to save it from sinking.'

`Where are ze pearls?'

On the ship, wherever that is.'

'You know where ze bed is, eh?' leered Castanelli. 'Yes, roughly,' admitted Ginger.

'You show me in ze morning—yes?'

I'll think about it,' promised Ginger, who was anxious to gain time to think, for his brain was still in a whirl and there were now so many factors to be taken into consideration. Castanelli drew his knife and fingered the point significantly. 'You tink hard about it,' he suggested softly. 'And when you tink, remember zis. My boys Solomon Island boys. You know what zey eat in ze Solomon? Zey eat men—yes. And my boys are very, very hungry for fresh meat, You tink hard about zat.' He said something to his crew in a language which Ginger did not understand. Rough hands seized him and dragged him to the companion. Down the stairway he was bundled, and along a corridor. A door was opened, and he was pushed into the same evil-smelling compartment from which he had once rescued Shell-Breaker. It was pitch dark. The door closed and a bolt was shot. For a moment he stood listening to the soft pad of retreating bare feet; then he sat down on the damp board floor to think.

I N spite of his insalubrious quarters Ginger eventually fell asleep. His head ached from thinking and from the blow he had received. It was not unnatural, too, that he was depressed, for the whole expedition, which had started so well, had suddenly gone to pieces. Its members were scattered, he knew not where. The island was a wreck. The shell had been lost. Full Moon was presumably still on the island, where she might escape harm as long as Castanelli did not find her. As for Shell-Breaker, anything could have happened to him. He, too, might have been captured. On the other hand, he might still be in the water near the schooner, although it was more likely that he had swum back to the island and rejoined Full Moon. There was always a chance that he might have been seized by the shark which was probably still in the lagoon. With one thing and another, in a few hours disaster had overtaken the party at the moment when success seemed assured. Ginger was not accustomed to look on the black side of things, but it is not to be wondered at that as he stretched himself out on the damp, evil-smelling boards, he was a prey to melancholy. He felt that he could do nothing. He was not even armed, for his automatic had been taken from his pocket. But so weary was he that not even his dismal thoughts, and the innumerable cockroaches that swarmed over him, could prevent him from sinking into a sleep of exhaustion.

He was awakened by an uproar on the deck above him. He could hear the Solomon Island boys jabbering in their own language, and

Castanelli cursing like a maniac; but what it was all about he had no means of knowing. Getting on his feet he was relieved to find that his cubby hole of a prison was at least provided with a light, a small circle of thick glass let into the deck, and the fact that it was now dull grey suggested that the hour was dawn.

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Hardly had he made this observation when there was a patter of bare feet in the passage outside; the door was thrown open; without any preamble two of the Solomon Island boys entered, seized him, and hurried him up on deck, where Castanelli was standing, white with rage, spitting like an angry cat. The Corsican eyed his prisoner malevolently through half-closed eyes as he advanced slowly towards him. His fingers were opening and closing like claws. 'Who else was on island wiz you?' he grated. Ginger did not answer.

Castanelli flew into a fury. Indeed, he lost control of himself. 'Who take my dinghy?' he screamed.

Ginger drew a deep breath. So that was it. The dinghy had gone. Then Shell-Breaker and Full Moon, or one of them, must have returned to the schooner after he had been captured, and succeeded where he had failed. The knowledge gave him new hope and he allowed a smile of satisfaction to cross his face. Which, in the circumstances, was a mistake. Castanelli noted the smile. Already beside himself, he snarled like a wolf as he struck Ginger a blow across the face that sent him reeling into the scuppers: Ginger picked himself up slowly, wiping blood from his lips. Castanelli stood watching him, panting with suppressed rage. 'Who was wiz you last night?' he purred, advancing towards Ginger again.

To attempt to conceal the truth was futile, and Ginger realized it. Obviously, some one had been with him or the dinghy could not have been stolen. 'Shell-Breaker,' he said quietly, hoping by this time that he was far away.

The Corsican eyed Ginger with such an expression of hatred that he fully expected to be murdered on the spot. 'Zat sneaking little kanaka,' breathed Castanelli. 'Where he go?' he screamed, with such violence that Ginger took a pace backwards.

'To Rutuona, I hope,' he replied. 'If he started early he should be nearly there by now.'

Castanelli caught his breath and looked round the sky. Ginger could

read what was passing in his mind. He was trying to work out if it would be possible to overtake the dinghy before it reached the larger island. And Ginger could have answered the question for him. It was not, for

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there was not a breath of wind; the open sea, as well as the lagoon, was as flat as a millpond. Not a cat's-paw ruffled the water; there was not a cloud in the sky, nor anything else to suggest that a breeze was on the way.

Castanelli was not slow to realize this, and the knowledge did nothing to improve his temper. On the contrary he flew into a fresh paroxysm of passion. Taking Ginger by the throat he forced him back against the mainmast and drew his knife. 'I show you my way with puppies,' he ground out through his teeth.

Ginger knew that he was within an ace of death, but he did not lose his head. He knew that in his present state of mind the Corsican was capable of anything. 'Kill me and you will never find the pearl-bed,' he said.

Castanelli hesitated, and nodded slowly as the truth of this statement penetrated into his frenzied brain. He lowered his arm. 'Ah,' he breathed. 'Ze pearls—yes. I think I keep you alive for a little while.' He released Ginger suddenly and rapped out an order at the boys who were standing round, watching the 'proceedings with amused j

interest. The way they jumped to obey their bullying skipper revealed their fear of him. They ran to the longboat, and in a few minutes it was on the water by the schooner's side. Six of them got into it and picked up the oars. 'You come with me,' Castanelli told Ginger, and they got into the boat, which was quickly rowed ashore. Ginger wondered what the man was going to do, but he was not left in doubt for very long, for as soon as they were ashore the boys started collecting the shell that lay strewn along the beach at high-water mark. Now that the sea had gone down Ginger saw that there was quite a lot of it lying high and dry, and still more in the shallow water. That which had been on the far side of the island had apparently been thrown right over the ridge when the waves swept across. So Ginger thought, idly, for he was not particularly interested. He watched four of the boys throwing the shell into a pile; another was carrying it to the longboat, and a sixth was collecting nuts. Castanelli, taking Ginger with him, began rummaging about on the

site of the camp, putting together anything worth saving, the remains of stores and a few odd pieces 113

of tackle. Occasionally he asked a question, but there was little Ginger could, or would, tell him. From the speed at which the Corsican was working he judged that he was anxious to get the work finished, in which case it was not unreasonable to suppose that he had no intention of remaining in the lagoon. Perhaps he had Shell-Breaker in mind, and was anxious to get away in case he returned with assistance. Thus ran Ginger's thoughts as he watched Castanelli delving about among the seaweed and other rubbish. The sun climbed up into an azure sky, and as the day advanced the island shimmered in the heat. Ginger continued watching Castanelli's activities in a disinterested fashion, turning over in his mind the possibility of escape. There seemed little chance of it. He had not overlooked the grotto as a hiding-place if he could get away, but the chances of this were remote. For one thing Castanelli was watching him closely, and the butt of a heavy revolver protruding from his hip pocket discouraged the idea of making a dash for it. In any case, the boys were working on the beach between him and the cove, so to reach it without being intercepted was manifestly impossible. His interest quickened as Castanelli approached the spot where the pearls had been hidden; it was now half covered by a pile of seaweed which had wrapped itself round the coral. Castanelli dragged some of it aside with his hands, and cleared the remainder with his foot, and was about to turn away when something caught his eye. He went back and reached down.

Ginger's heart stopped beating for an instant, and then raced in a burst of palpitation. In spite of the heat he felt a chill creep over him. Sticking up out of the sand was the top half of a tin. It was a biscuit-tin, and he recognized it instantly. It was in such a tin that Sandy had put the pearls, and there could hardly be two such tins in the same place. The waves had washed most of the sand away, and

so partly uncovered it. For a brief moment he hoped that

Castanelli would not see it, but when it became obvious

that he had he prayed fervently that he would not trouble to investigate it. But the Corsican was leaving nothing that was worth taking away. Without the least suspicion of its contents he kicked the sand aside with his foot and dragged 114

the tin from its bed. Without evert glancing at Ginger—whose face

might have betrayed the secret, for it was as white as death—he tossed the tin amongst the others. Ginger almost gasped his relief as it spun through the air, for while Castanelli did not know what it contained there was always a chance that he might recover it. But his hope was shortlived. The lid either fitted loosely or struck one of the other tins, for as it rolled into the pile the top flew off, and its contents streamed in a gleaming cascade across the sand. Castanelli had already half turned away, but his eyes remained on the tin just long enough to see it fly open. For a second he stood like a man petrified, his little eyes bulging in their sockets; then he let out a hoarse yell, shouted something in a language Ginger did not understand, and in a moment was on his knees, picking up the pearls with trembling fingers and putting them back into the tin. Once he paused to turn to Ginger a face flushed with exultation. He was panting with excitement. His crew ran up, and gave vent to their feelings in a series of staccato ejaculations. Ginger, sick to the very soul, could only watch helplessly. The appearance of the tin had been as great a shock to him as the sight of the pearls had, been to the schooner captain. Why or how they had come to be left behind he could not remotely imagine. It was unbelievable, incredible, and he could have wept with mortification. Everything had looked black enough before, but now he was swept by a wave of depression that left him weak with misery. But behind the depression there grew a fierce hatred of the man who was now chuckling with glee, and he began to understand why so many crimes had been committed for these gems of the sea.

At the time of Castanelli's startling discovery the longboat had just left for the schooner with the first load of shell. The two boys who had gone with it, seeing the commotion ashore, now shouted to know what it was about, and their companions joyfully informed them. The work of unloading was hastened, and the boat was soon flashing back towards the silver beach.

There was still a big pile of shell lying there, and when the boys started loading afresh Ginger marvelled at the mentality of a man who, with a fortune already in his

pocket, could bother about a few hundreds of pounds extra. However, Castanelli evidently saw no reason why he should not have the shell as well as the pearls, for he remained on the island supervising the work until the last shell had been collected. Occasionally he glanced at Ginger, whose downcast face seemed to amuse him; he was no longer vindictive, but smiling with supreme content. 'Why you not tell me ze pearls still here?' he questioned once.

I did not know myself,' returned Ginger, with such bitterness that the Corsican laughed aloud.

'Your friends save me all ze trouble,' he murmured. 'Alway ze way wiz pearls,' he added cryptically, tossing Ginger a coconut. He had already punctured one, and after drinking the milk was crunching the soft spongy flesh.

Ginger was in no mood for eating, but he drank the milk with relish, for his throat was parched.

The sun was touching the horizon by the time the last few shells, and the remainder of the stores, had been thrown into the longboat. The rowers took their places. For some time Ginger had been hoping that Castanelli would go, leaving him marooned on the island, because he felt sure that sooner or later Biggles would return to look for him. But this hope did not materialize. Castanelli looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two with a curious expression on his face, and then motioned him to get into the boat. Ginger obeyed, and the Corsican got in behind him. From the way he looked round to make sure that nothing had been left behind it was fairly clear that he had no intention of returning. The boat was pushed off, and cut an ever-spreading ripple across the still water as it sped towards the schooner. Ginger watched it with the calm of utter despair. All day he had been listening, hoping to hear the familiar roar of the 'Scud', but in vain. Now that night was closing in it certainly would not come until the morrow—if then—and by that time anything could have happened.

As they climbed up on the schooner's deck a slant of wind sent a succession of curving ripples sweeping across the lagoon, and the schooner rocked gently. Castanelli let out a yell of triumph, and Ginger's mouth turned dry with bitterness as he realized that even nature was playing into

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the Corsican's hands. First the hurricane, which had driven the 'Scud' away and disclosed the pearls and now a breeze just when Castanelli most needed it. With a fair wind the schooner would be a hundred miles away by the next day, so even if Biggles did return it would avail him nothing.

Castanelli, the pearl-tin under his arm, went below, but was soon on deck again without it. In a vague sort of way Ginger noted that the wind appeared to have had an immediate effect on his plans where he



himself was concerned, for after speaking in a low voice to the crew he turned to his prisoner with such an expression on his face that Ginger felt a qualm of alarm.

'You no like my ship? I tink you best stay here,' purred Castanelli. Ginger drew a deep breath of relief. Nothing would have suited him better, but he did not say so.

'But perhaps you talk too much,' went on Castanelli smoothly. 'I am very sorry, but I tink you talk no more.' Then, with a nod to the crew, he turned and walked towards the wheel. Four of the boys ran to the capstan, and a chain clanked as the anchor came up. A sail bellied out against the fast-darkening sky.

Two of the repulsive-looking Solomon Islanders had remained beside Ginger, who, interested in watching the schooner get under way and approach the entrance to the lagoon, barely noticed them. But when he felt them lay hands on him he turned sharply to see what they were doing. Not until then did a terrible suspicion come into his mind. One of them had tied a length of rope round his waist, and the other was now attaching the loose end to a piece of rusty iron piping. For a moment Ginger could only stare in mute horror, still refusing to believe what his eyes were telling him, but when the natives started dragging him towards the side of the ship there was no longer any doubt as to their intention. He knew that they were going to throw him overboard. The piece of iron was to take him to the bottom.

As soon as he realized this he began to struggle violently, trying to free himself from the rope, but the natives seized him, and in their powerful hands he was helpless. One dragged his arms behind him, and the other whipped up his

feet, so that he could not even kick. As helpless as a rabbit in the hands of a poacher he was carried to the rail. One of the natives grunted, and he was swung into the air. He made a last frantic clutch at the rail, but his hand missed it by a foot, and the next instant the water had closed over his head. Even before he could get to the surface and fill his lungs he felt the weight of the iron take effect and drag him down. Struggling with a desperation near to madness he seized the rope, but the iron was far below him and he could do nothing to check his descent. He felt the weight of the water pressing on him. Then, suddenly, the downward movement ended, and he knew that the iron had reached the bottom. Frantically he dragged at the rope. All around him was darkness. B BIGGLES was still at Rutuona with Algy and Sandy. His difficulties were not so alarming as

those of Ginger, although he suffered considerable anxiety on his account, but they were bad enough. To start with, his fears had been only too well founded when, during the hurricane, he had expressed a hope that no debris would fall on them. A palm-stem had crashed down on the port wing-tip, and while the wing had not been torn off the leading edge had been crushed, so that flying was out of the question until it had been repaired. Lighter matter, such as brushwood, had been piled up around the Scud, so that by the time the hurricane had passed the machine was almost buried. 118

For those on board to get ashore had been no easy matter, for the flimsy rubbish would not support their weight and at the same time it made swimming impossible. In the end they had piled rubbish upon rubbish and then trampled it down until it formed a bridge of sufficient strength to carry them. By this time it was dark, and they passed the night in even more discomfort than Ginger, who was, of course, in the grotto, where he was at least free from the disturbing attentions of the myriads of mosquitoes that attacked Biggles, Algy, and Sandy as they rested in a swamp by the edge of the creek in which the machine had come down.

As soon as it was light they had set off for the village, hoping that it would not take them more than an hour or two to reach it, since by their reckoning it was not more than six miles away. But unexpected difficulties presented themselves. Biggles had seen many jungles, but never growth so impenetrable as that which fringed the creek. It was impossible to move in any direction without hacking every inch of the way with their knives—an exhausting business in the heat; apart from which their faces were soon covered with spots of blood from the vicious bites of sand-flies. Then, just as they thought they were through, and not more than a quarter of a mile from the beach, which they knew ran all the way to the village, they came to an obstacle which not even Biggles's agile brain could devise a means of crossing. It was the mouth of the river, which was not so much a river as a swamp; a stagnant lake which had formed in the low ground at the foot of the hills. Had it been only water it would have been a simple matter to swim across, for the distance was not more than a hundred yards; but there was more than that to consider; the water was choked by a riotous growth of water-lilies, great pink blooms which in different circumstances would have been objects for admiration. The fact that the huge, flat, fleshy leaves were the homes of revolting-looking centipedes, nearly a foot long, did not make the prospect of trying to swim across any more agreeable. However, it was obviously impossible to swim, for the thick white roots of the lilies formed an almost solid mass under the water, and as they were too pliable to

bear any weight the only alternative was to go round.

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So, blood-stained and weary, they had to start hacking a new path inland along the edge of the swamp. The depressing part of the task was that they did not know how far the swamp extended, although Sandy held the view that it could not be far on account of the hills which rose steeply no great distance away. And in this assumption he was correct. A few hundred yards and the swamp began to narrow, until at length they came to a place where a fallen breadfruit-tree offered a passage across. By this time it was nearly dark. Far from reaching the village in a few hours they had been all day in a jungle, and had covered less than a mile.

They crossed the swamp by means of the tree just as the sun was setting, only to discover when they were on the other side that the jungle was again so thick that it was useless even to think of going on until daylight came. Even so, Biggles was in favour of pushing on, but Sandy declared that it was madness. Even if they did not wander into a swamp as deadly as quicksand, which was probable, they would certainly lose their way in the darkness, and make so little progress that the labour was not worth while. After considering the matter the others were reluctantly compelled to agree. So, again beset by countless mosquitos and surrounded by alarming phosphorescent fungus, they remained in the fallen tree prepared to pass another night of misery. 'I'm beginning to understand why pearls are expensive,' remarked Biggles grimly, as he slapped at the insects that were settling on his face.

As the night wore on these became so bad that he lit a fire and sat in the smoke, although the pungent reek of the wood was nearly as hard to endure as the bites of the mosquitoes.

'I wouldn't mind so much if I knew that those kids were all right,' he muttered once. 'I can't imagine what could have happened to them.'

Neither Sandy nor Algy replied. Perhaps they both hesitated to express their views. Slowly the night wore on, the swamp-water glowing with phosphorescent light as unseen creatures moved about in it. Strange noises came from the tree-ferns; not even Sandy knew what made them. Great moths flitted silently across

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the fiery area, and once an enormous bat gave them all a fright by

dashing itself against the tree. The darkness was incredible; it hung over them like a weight. In the silence invisible creatures crept and rustled. Once Algy dozed, to awake from a fitful dream with the feeling that something was crawling on his leg. By the light of the dimly burning fire he saw a reddish-brown centipede, ten inches long, clinging to his bare ankle. With a convulsive shudder he tore it off with a quick jerk and flung the thing from him. A double line of scarlet spots rose on the place where the centipede had been; his ankle began to swell; and it remained painful for many days. Sandy puffed at his pipe incessantly, and Biggles smoked all his cigarettes.

'Thank heaven, I believe it's getting light at last,' muttered Algy, after a long silence. '

One more night of this and I shall be ready for the madhouse. These South Sea islands aren't all that they're made out to be.'

Biggles stood up stiffly. 'Well, let's be moving,' he said, and although it was still only grey twilight he commenced cutting a path down the far side of the swamp towards the beach.

The others joined him. The strain of the last two days and nights was beginning to tell on them, 'and they were all nearly exhausted by the time they staggered from the undergrowth on to the open sand, where they spent some minutes looking for water; but there was none except that of the swamp, which they would not touch.

'Never mind; let's get along. We ought to be in the village inside a couple of hours,'

murmured Biggles, and with dragging feet they set off along the sand. They stopped at the first coconut palm they reached, and, hunting about, found several nuts that had been dislodged by the hurricane. They drank the milk greedily and, strengthened by its cool sweetness, made better time for the rest of the journey.

They had nearly reached the village when Algy stopped suddenly, staring at something ahead. The others, following the direction of his eyes, were just in time to see a native disappear like a shadow into the dense shade of the trees. It was not an ordinary native, such as those they had previously met in the village; he was smeared from head

to foot with white chalk or mud, put on in the most fantastic designs.

'Something's happening here,' muttered Sandy, looking worried.

‘What do you mean? What could happen?’ inquired Biggles.

‘You saw that chap? He was in war-paint—and he was carrying a war club. I haven’t seen such a thing in years. He means business, or he wouldn’t be got up like that. They take these things very seriously. It’s against the law, anyway. They are not allowed to do any of this war stuff nowadays, because once they start they’re not responsible for their actions. There you are! Hark at the drums.’ A hollow booming sound echoed weirdly through the jungle. ‘If you listen you’ll hear others answering it,’ declared Sandy. ‘They’re calling the warriors together. Something must have happened since we were here last; I only hope some fool hasn’t been causing trouble or we may find ourselves in the cooking-pot presently. When they get the war fever on them they’re not particular who they kill.’

‘But they’re not cannibals, surely?’ put in Biggles unbelievably. Sandy threw him a sidelong glance. ‘Not one of them would admit it, and I doubt if any of the youngsters would have anything to do with “long pig”,’ he muttered. ‘But I wouldn’t

t trust the old ‘uns. I’ll warrant plenty of the old men here pine for the days when the enemy was served up for supper. The authorities have done everything they can to suppress cannibalism, and generally speaking they’ve succeeded, but once in a while there are rumours of it back in the hills. Mind you, these people were never cannibals for the sake of it; they’ve all the other food they need; it was just a custom to eat a part of some particularly hated enemy.’

‘Well, it’s no use messing about,’ declared Biggles. ‘We’d better go and see what’s going on.’

Two more natives appeared just in front of them. Both were in war-paint, and both carried war clubs. They bolted like rabbits at the sight of the white men, who soon reached the village and marched straight into it. Only two or three women were in sight. The drums had stopped booming.

Sandy walked up to an old woman and spoke to her in

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her own language, but she only sniggered. He turned to Biggles. ‘They’re all hiding in the bush,’ he said. ‘I’ll bet the whole of them are within earshot, but they won’t show up for fear we report them.’ Cupping his hands round his mouth he yelled for Roaring Wave. A few moments later the bushes parted and a slim figure stepped out. A

white band encircled his forehead and his chest was painted with a hideous magical device. Algy clutched Biggles's arm. 'Great heavens! ' he cried incredulously. 'It's Shell-Breaker! '

'Shell-Breaker, come here,' ordered Sandy sternly. The boy approached, nervously.

'What for you make war?' asked Sandy curtly.

'Make war on Atanelli,' muttered Shell-Breaker sullenly.

'Ask him where the others are,' Biggles told Sandy.

Sandy spoke to the boy in his own tongue, whereupon Shell-Breaker broke into a torrent of explanation, waving his hands to add expression to his story. At last he broke off from sheer exhaustion.

Sandy drew a deep breath and turned to the others. His face was a picture of wonderment and dismay. 'Ginger's a prisoner on Castanelli's schooner,' he said.

'What?' cried Biggles and Algy together.

'Shell-Breaker's story rings true enough,' went on Sandy. 'And there doesn't seem to be any reason why he should lie to us. He says this is what happened. After they had finished fishing they went for a swim in a cove and discovered a grotto; the entrance was under cover; however, they swam in and sat on a ledge. While they were there a shark appeared in the entrance and trapped them. They had to stay there all night. In the morning the shark had gone so they swam out, only to find that we were no longer there. Then the hurricane hit the island and pretty well wrecked it. No sooner had the hurricane moved on than Castanelli sailed into the lagoon. They waited until dark and then tried to pinch the schooner's dinghy. Ginger was caught in the act and taken aboard. Shell-Breaker got to the reef, but came back later on and got the dinghy and rowed it singlehanded to Rutuona. Full Moon stayed behind to watch what happened. Shell-Breaker only got here about an hour ago, and his story has sent everybody

war-mad. Roaring Wave has sworn to have Castanelli's blood. They've got their big war canoe all ready; apparently they were just going to start when we turned up.'

Biggles listened to this story in silence, his first expression of relief on hearing that Ginger was still alive changing slowly to one of amazement. 'If Ginger is on Castanelli's schooner we've got to get him

off,' he said slowly. 'I'm relieved to learn that nothing more serious has happened.'

Algy looked dubious. 'It might be harder to get Ginger back than it sounds,' he muttered. '

Castanelli's got a tough crew, and there are only three of us. The machine is out of action, anyway. In any case, with Ginger on board, we couldn't shoot the schooner up.'

'I wouldn't say that the "Scud" is out of action,' returned Biggles quickly.

'But you can't fly it with a busted wing.'

'I didn't say anything about flying it; there's no reason why we shouldn't taxi it across to the island, if we can get it clear.'

'I don't want to raise difficulties, but Castanelli will hear our engines,' Algy pointed out. '

All those toughs of his are armed, and they're likely to sink the "Scud" before we could get it near enough to board them. We must look at the thing sanely. To suppose that we could taxi right up to the schooner without one or more of us being hit would be expecting too much. We've got to get Ginger off, of course, but getting the "Scud" sunk won't help us.'

Biggles nodded. 'I agree,' he murmured. 'It would need a dozen men to take that schooner by force, unless surprise tactics were employed. We've no proof that the schooner is still there, if it comes to that. There ought to be some way in which we can use these Marquesans.' Biggles thought for a moment. 'I don't like the idea of their going without us,' he continued. 'If there is a general attack Ginger is as likely to get hurt as anybody.'

'That's true,' remarked Sandy. 'Once they start on a job they're apt to go crazy. Why not taxi the machine across and take a bunch of them with us? We could get ten or a dozen in the cabin at a pinch.'

'Why not take the whole blessed war canoe in tow?' suggested Algy.

'By gosh! that's an idea!' cried Sandy.

'We might as well do both,' Biggles pointed out. 'We could put some of them in the machine and tow the canoe as well. How many will the canoe hold, Sandy?'

'I don't know; I haven't seen it; but judging from others I've seen it will probably carry thirty or forty. But we shall have to watch what we're doing. If we once set these boys on to Castanelli there will be no holding them, and if they kill him we shall be answerable for it.'

'That doesn't worry me,' declared Biggles. 'We've a witness to prove that Ginger is on board, a prisoner, so we should be justified in trying to get him off. What worries me most is the time limit. How long is Castanelli going to stay in the lagoon, even supposing he is still there? It's going to take us some time to get the machine clear, don't forget. It's after midday already. Whatever we do it is going to be dark before we get to the island.'

'Aye, that's true enough,' admitted Sandy. 'I agree with you, I think it would be dangerous to let these Marquesans go without us. I reckon our best plan would be to explain the position to Roaring Wave; if he falls in with us he could lend us some men to get the "Scud" out of the creek. After that it wouldn't take us long to get to the island. We could tow the canoe most of the way. Then, when we got near the island, we could let the canoe tow the machine. In that way we should make no noise, and we might-be able to get right up to the schooner without being seen.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's it,' he said. 'If we towed the Marquesans nearly to the island they would still be fresh when we got there. If we find that the schooner has gone, the only thing we can do is to repair the wing as quickly as possible and fly round as long as we have any petrol left.'

'That sounds like common sense to me,' agreed Sandy. 'I'll go and have a word with Roaring Wave, or tell Shell-Breaker to go and fetch him.' He turned to Shell-Breaker, who still stood by him, and spoke to him at some length.

Shell-Breaker dashed off into the trees, where his voice could be heard raised in a long harangue. His speech was concluded in a pandemonium of yells, and a few moments later about threescore painted warriors, some carrying clubs and some spears, burst out of the bushes.

'They're a pretty tough-looking crowd to try to keep in 125



order,' observed Biggles, regarding the striped warriors with misgivings.

'You leave 'em to me,' said Sandy confidently, going to meet them. Somehow he managed to pick out Roaring Wave, and held a brief conversation with him. At the finish the Chief gave a shout and disappeared again into the bushes, followed by his pack. 'It's all right,' said Sandy, returning to the others. 'In fact, I believe the old man is tickled to death that we are going into the business with him. One thing is certain; they hate the sight of Castanelli, and once they get started there will be no stopping them.'

'Where have they gone now?' asked Algy.

'To get the canoe,' replied Sandy. 'Here they come.'

Both Biggles and Algy stared in astonishment as from underneath the trees appeared the grotesque painted prow of an enormous canoe. It was a beautiful piece of work, carved from end to end in a regular pattern, gleaming with oil. It was not less than forty feet long and needed nearly forty men to carry it. In dead silence the warriors carried it down to the water and launched it on the bay.

'Come on,' said Sandy.

'Where to?' asked Biggles.

'Back to the "Scud", of course. There is no sense in will walking. The canoe wi have us there in half the time.' 'That suits me,' agreed Biggles. In a few minutes the three white men were seated in the stern of the canoe, staring at the broad painted backs of thirty natives, in a double row, fifteen on each side, each holding a beautifully carved paddle. Their weapons lay at their feet. Roaring Wave stood in the bows, looking ahead. He raised his spear and pointed. Instantly thirty paddles dug deeply into the water, and the canoe streaked forward like an arrow. Roaring Wave's spear fell, and the flashing paddles dipped again. And so it continued, the paddles keeping perfect time with the strokes of the spear.

'By Jove! This is something like travelling,' murmured Algy admiringly.

'You bet it is,' answered Sandy. 'Think what this bay must have looked like years ago, with perhaps fifty canoes like this one all sweeping out to sea in formation to make a raid on a neighbouring island. It must have been a sight worth watching.'

In less than an hour they were at the creek, where Sandy, pointing to the 'Scud', explained to the Chief what was required. After that there was nothing more to do than sit in the canoe and watch the natives hacking at the brushwood and other debris with their heavy, keen-edged knives. At first they worked from the canoe, but as the 'Scud'

was neared many of them got into the water and tore the stuff away with their hands. As soon as a fairway had been made Biggles climbed on board, and the others followed him. He went forward into the cockpit and made ready to start the engines, knowing that this would not alarm the natives, who had already seen the machine on the water near the village.

It was a long, tedious business getting the machine entirely clear, and darkness was closing in by the time the work was nearly complete. At length a line was thrown to the canoe; the natives took their places and towed the aircraft into the clear water in the middle of the creek. The canoe cast off, and was eased alongside, whereupon Sandy climbed up on to the centre section and explained the plan in detail, to make sure that it was understood. The engines were then started. Ten of the natives were transferred to the

'Scud' to reduce the drag of the canoe, which was then taken in tow. Slowly, with her engines roaring, the aircraft taxied towards the open sea. The ancient war-chant of the Marquesans rose into the still air.

Biggles glanced at Sandy and smiled; but he would not have done so if he had known that at that very moment Ginger was just being dragged down to the bottom of the lagoon.

WHEN Ginger had been dragged down to the bed of the lagoon he knew that nothing short of a miracle could save him, and although he still struggled to free himself he felt that it was hopeless. From the moment he had realized Castanelli's intention he had given himself up for lost, and he can hardly be blamed for that. But there is an old saying to the effect that while there is life there is hope, and never was the truth of it better demonstrated.

His senses were fast leaving him when his outflung arms collided with something soft. It might be thought that with death imminent his fear could not be greater than it already was, but at the touch of that unseen body his fear became blind terror, which in the circumstances is hardly to be wondered at, for he knew only too well what horrors

dwelt in the warm waters of that sapphire sea. Again came the touch; he struggled violently, but, nevertheless, something long and soft wrapped itself about his legs, gripping them firmly. That it was an octopus he had no doubt whatever. It was the culminating horror, and as far as he was concerned, it was the end. There is a limit to what human consciousness can stand without collapsing.

His next sensation would be difficult to describe. It was, perhaps, more curiosity than anything else. He was quite sure that he was now dead; he did not see how it could be otherwise; but death appeared to be taking a form so strange that he was amazed. In the first place, he was still conscious of his body, for his stomach hurt him excruciatingly. And he was still able to think, although his thoughts were vague and disjointed. Where was he? What was happening? He wondered. It was all very confused. But presently he found himself able to think more clearly, and he discovered that his eyes were open. Or he thought they were—he was by no means sure. As far as he could make

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out he was lying head downwards on a shelving slope of coral. That seemed natural enough. It was only to be expected. But what was his face doing out of the water? He was sure it was out of the water, but not more than an inch or two. Phosphorescent wavelets were lapping against the coral just below his eyes. He could hear them as well as see them. Water was also running down the coral and dripping into the wavelets. He noticed with surprise that it was coming out of his mouth and nostrils, but on thinking it over he realized that there was nothing strange about that, after all, for he must have swallowed vast quantities of water.

He could see the wavelets more clearly now, and discovered that the scene around him was becoming more solid, and at the same time the pain in his stomach became more intense. He realized that it was due to a heavy weight on his back, a weight that rose and fell regularly. He was lying face downwards, and every time the weight fell the i

pain in his stomach became almost unbearable. At last it became so bad that he groaned. He knew that he had groaned because he distinctly heard the sound, and it added to his amazement. Instantly the weight on his back occurred again with increased violence, and at the same time something seized his arms and dragged them upwards. It had the result of sending more water gushing from his mouth. His arm were lowered and then raised again, as if some one was using them as pump-handles; and all the time the dreadful weight was on his back, forcing his stomach against the hard coral. He groaned again

with the agony of it.

At last he could stand it no longer. Not even in death could he endure such agony. With a sudden wrench he tore his arms free from the grip that held them by the wrists, and with a tremendous effort flung the weight off his back. Clutching at the coral he dragged himself back from the water and at the same time twisted into a more horizontal position. He looked up. At first he could see nothing except a star-spangled sky, and the black silhouette of rocks against it. Then, close at hand, a dark form moved like a shadow. 'You plenty better bymeby,' said a small voice.

Again it would be difficult to describe Ginger's sensa130

tions at the sound of that well-remembered voice. For a moment he could do nothing but vomit water in a fearful fit of retching, but when the spasm passed he felt more normal, and he looked again at the dark figure. 'Full Moon! ' was all he could say, in a voice heavy with wonderment.

Full Moon knelt down beside him. 'You feelum better bymeby,' she whispered. 'One time I reckon you plenty dead—'

'But where have you 'come from?' asked Ginger, sitting up, and feeling his stomach tenderly. He saw that a jagged piece of coral pressing into it had caused the pain.

'Me on schooner all long time,' answered Full Moon.

Ginger sat silent for a moment, trying to force his aching brain to assimilate this piece of information. 'On the schooner?' he got out at last. 'You mean you were on the schooner when they threw me over?'

'Yes, I stay on schooner all day, hide under sail.'

Ginger shook his head. The business was becoming more and more unbelievable. 'Where is Shell-Breaker?' he asked suddenly.

'He take dinghy and go Rutuona plenty quick,' returned Full Moon.

'But how did you get on the schooner?'

Full Moon explained. 'When you get hit on head. by Atanelli, Shell-Breaker swim fast under water. He tell me. We go back. Shell-Breaker take dinghy. I stay to see what Atanelli do. Me hide in sail, see everything. See Solomon boys throw you overboard. Me swim down,

but you kick like debil-debil. I cut rope, but reckon you die plenty quick, so I pull you on reef.'

Ginger was still inclined to believe that the whole thing had been a ghastly nightmare, but he saw that the rope was still round his waist, with a short end hanging to it, and he knew that it must have happened. For a little while he was so overcome by the simple devotion of the two Marquesans that he could not trust himself to speak. 'Full Moon, one day I thank you for this,' he said at last, huskily. 'I think you're wonderful.'

Full Moon laughed. 'What for wonderful?' she asked,

naïvely. 'Me no run away when plenty trouble. Me glad

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when you go overboard; no longer wonder how save you from schooner.'

'Well, I reckon you're a brick,' declared Ginger. 'What is brick?' inquired Full Moon curiously.

Ginger could not find an adequate answer. 'Never mind,'

he said, and stood up, shakily.

'We stay here,' said Full Moon. 'Shell-Breaker he come back bymeby with long canoe.'

Ginger looked round. 'Did you say we were on the reef?' 'Yes, on reef.'

Atanelli gone?'

'Yes, he make sail'

One day I'm going to give myself the pleasure of shooting that scoundrel,' declared Ginger.

'Yes, me kill, too,' answered Full Moon, cheerfully.

Ginger had to kneel down again as he was shaken by another spasm of retching. He still felt deadly sick as a result of all the salt water he had swallowed, but after a time he got up and announced that he was able to get to the island. The moon had just come up, and he looked along the reef, which hitherto he had not examined very closely. He had a horror of entering the water again, but examining the reef he saw that

it was possible to get to the island without swimming. He suggested this to Full Moon, who agreed that it was the best way.

'Any feke on these rocks?' asked Ginger, cautiously.

Full Moon saw nothing unusual in the question. 'Maybe,' she said, eyeing the reef with professional eyes. Then she shook her head. 'No feke,' she decided. 'Plenty crab. No crab if feke here.'

'Well, that's something to be thankful for, at any rate,' muttered Ginger, to whom an octopus was one degree worse than a shark.

'We walk now,' suggested Full Moon. 'You drink plenty coconut water you feel better bymeby.'

'Yes, I could do with a drink,' agreed Ginger, whose mouth was parched from swallowing salt water.

Full Moon cut the remains of the rope from his waist. Then, hand in hand, they walked slowly up the moonlit coral to the top of the reef, where they pulled up dead, staring unbelievably. Instead of finding only the sea stretching to the horizon they saw a schooner standing straight to132

wards the entrance to the lagoon. It was not more than a hundred yards away. Full Moon recovered her presence of mind first. 'Àtanelli, he come back,' she hissed, and dropped behind a large piece of coral.

Ginger was too stunned to speak. It was the very last thing he expected. Taking his cue from Full Moon, he dropped behind another large piece of coral, but quick as he had been he was too late. A yell on the schooner told him that they had been seen. Full Moon sprang to her feet. 'We run plenty quick,' she said tersely and set off along the reef towards the island, jumping from rock to rock with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

Ginger followed as fast as he could, but he had by no means recovered from his recent terrible experience, and his legs tottered under him. Seeing his condition, Full Moon waited and helped him over the most difficult places, but they were still some distance from the place

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where the reef joined the island when a rifle barked, and a shot tore away a piece of coral unpleasantly close to them. Looking back, Ginger saw that the schooner was already passing through the

entrance to the lagoon, and although it was moving slowly the longboat was swinging over the side. Another shot zipped viciously into the coral - and he ran on. He knew all about the difficulty of shooting accurately by moonlight, but he took no chances. Actually, he was more concerned for Full Moon than for himself. Jumping from rock to rock they sped on, taking advantage of such cover as was available, and Ginger's weakness was almost forgotten in the face of the new peril. Castanelli—for Ginger had no doubt as to who was doing the shooting—continued to fire from time to time, but although some of the shots came close they did no damage. But by the time the two fugitives had reached the island the longboat was racing across the lagoon, the rowers bending to their oars under Castanelli's furious encouragement. Ginger and Full Moon did not stop. The reef joined the island at its narrowest end, and it was clear that if Castanelli and his crew reached the island in time to cut them off from the wider end their capture was only a matter of

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minutes. The far end of the island was not only wider, but more rugged, and offered better hiding-places.

Ginger now led the way, making for the far side of the ridge where they could not be seen from the lagoon, and were therefore out of the danger of Castanelli's rifle. The going was not easy, for debris flung up by the hurricane lay everywhere—palm-fronds, piles of seaweed, and masses of coral—and detours had often to be made. However, they reached the wide end of the island, where Ginger, risking a peep over the ridge, saw the longboat being hauled up on the beach. Castanelli was already standing on the white sand, his rifle under his arm.

'Confound the fellow, what the dickens does he want to come back here for?' muttered Ginger angrily. 'I wish to goodness I had a rifle.'

Full Moon made no comment. Perhaps she knew the futility of wishing. Ginger thought rapidly. To remain hidden indefinitely on the island was clearly impossible. They might climb up into one of the few remaining palms, or find a place among the coral that would offer them cover for a little while; but once daylight came discovery would only be a matter of time. Had their presence on the island not been known to Castanelli the matter would not have been so difficult. In that case there would be no deliberate search. But now it was known that they were there, it was obvious that the schooner captain would search every nook and cranny; and he would not desist until he had found them. The Corsican had already revealed himself to be a cold-

blooded murderer, so in the event of capture Ginger knew what to expect. Castanelli would make certain next time. On the whole island there was only one place where they would be safe, and that was in the grotto. Even the Solomon Island boys might search for weeks without finding it. It was their only chance, and he told Full Moon so in a low voice. She had already realized it, and now set off towards the cove, picking up coconuts on the way. Ginger, perceiving the wisdom of this precaution, did the same. He knew that they might have to stay in the grotto for several days.

He expected no trouble in reaching the cove; his only

fear was that the shark might still be there, a contingency 134

he preferred not to contemplate. But again he was to -be disappointed, for just as they reached the cove a mop-head rounded a corner of the coral, the swimmer actually landing at the spot where Ginger had climbed up many times. It was one of Castanelli's crew. Why he had chosen to swim ashore and choose that particular place he did not know; he could only suppose that the fellow had suspected what they would do, and saw a way of putting himself in his master's good graces by out-flanking them. Ginger and Full Moon were just inside the tiny, semicircular cover when the native pulled himself ashore, and they could only crouch back into a depression in the coral trusting that they would not be seen. For a minute the native stood where he had come ashore, water dripping from his black body; then he let out a yell which made Ginger flinch. At first he thought that the native must have seen them, but when he made no move in their direction, and the shout was answered by another not far away, he realized that this was not so. The man was merely letting the others know where he was. Ginger prayed that he would go. If he would disappear only for a minute or two, it would give them all the time they needed to reach their grotto refuge. The man did, in fact, move a few paces forward to the edge of the cove, but it was only to climb up on the highest point of coral from where he could command a view over the whole of it, and some distance beyond. And there he evidently intended to remain, while the others, spread out across the island, drove the quarry towards him. Or so he imagined. Ginger could hear their shouts as they drew nearer. He felt Full Moon reach for her knife, but he pressed her back, knowing that it was absolutely out of the question to get anywhere near the man without being seen. And if once they were seen the end was a foregone conclusion. So they remained where they were, Ginger hoping that the search would presently be abandoned, at least for the time being.



A minute passed—five minutes—and then footsteps could be heard approaching. A second native appeared, followed shortly afterwards by Castanelli, conspicuous in a dirty suit of white ducks with a rifle under his arm. 'You no see?' he said to the waiting boy.

'No see, boss.'

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Castanelli sat down on the coral. 'They not far away,' he said confidently. 'We wait daylight.'

Ginger's heart sank. Their luck seemed to be absolutely dead out, but there was nothing they could do about it. He had lost all count of time, one reason being that he had no idea how long he had been unconscious. The moon passed its zenith and begin to sink, and still they crouched in their narrow hiding-place. A deadly weariness began to creep over him. That some of the natives were still carrying on the search he knew, for he often heard them shouting to each other. The situation became one of those evil dreams that go on and on, repeating the same thing over and over again indefinitely. All the time Castanelli sat on the rock, smoking innumerable cigars. Ginger had never hated any one quite as much as he hated the smooth-tongued Corsican. He hated him so much that had he possessed a weapon he would have shot him and risked the consequences. At long last the moonlight began to fade. A lavender streak, swiftly turning to pink, flushed the eastern sky, and Ginger knew that discovery was now only a matter of minutes. He looked again at Castanelli still sitting on his selected seat; it was obvious that he had no intention of moving. He was, however, looking the other way, presumably watching the boys who were still carrying on with the search. One only remained with him, and he, too, was looking in the same direction. Ginger put his lips close to Full Moon's ear. 'We no stay,' he said. 'If Atanelli turns he see us plenty quick. We make for grotto.'

Full Moon nodded to show that she understood.

Slowly, for he was as stiff as a rod, Ginger moved from his cramped position, ready to bolt. Full Moon joined him, and in another moment they were both creeping silently towards the water. Half way, neither of the two men on the rock had turned. They were now only a few yards from their objective, and Ginger was just beginning to hope that luck was favouring them at last, and that they would reach the water undetected, when the Solomon Islander turned. There appeared to be no reason why he should. It was almost as if his instinct had warned

him that something

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was moving. He spoke swiftly, touching Castanelli's arm, and then pointed to the fugitives.

Out of the corner of his eye Ginger saw the Corsican reach for his rifle, and he waited for no more. Even as he made a dash for the water Full Moon passed him like a brown streak, but they were practically side by side as they went head first into the water. As he turned to follow Full Moon to the cave Ginger distinctly felt the sharp concussion of a bullet striking the surface. The next moment they were in deep water, swimming through a dim twilight, as the sun was not yet up. Ginger swam by feel as much as anything. Had he not been to the cave before he would never have found it, but he knew where it was, so he dragged himself in and struck out through the inky blackness. Gasping for breath he came to the surface inside the grotto, to find Full Moon waiting for him. They climbed out and sat on their customary ledge, where Full Moon produced a single coconut from under her arm, and again Ginger marvelled at her foresight and ability.

There was just enough light in the grotto for them to see each other. Full Moon smiled, and Ginger smiled back, but in his heart he felt far from smiling. He knew that their escape could only be a brief respite. It was merely a matter of time before Castanelli's boys found the cave, and—well, he did not know what would happen then. He only knew that the Corsican would not go away and leave them there. 'I reckon we stay here long time,' remarked Full Moon philosophically, cracking one end of the nut against the coral.

Ginger nodded. He said nothing, for the simple reason that he could think of nothing to say. Wondering what devilment Castanelli was devising, he sat and watched the water turn from grey to mauve, and from mauve to blue. Full Moon handed him a piece of coconut and he munched it mechanically, for he was too weary to be hungry. The girl drew her knife and laid it on the coral beside her. 'I cut Atanelli's throat bymeby,

' she announced casually. 'Maybe I eat him,' she added pensively as an afterthought. In his overwrought state, the picture of Full Moon eating the fat Corsican made Ginger laugh immoderately. The grotto echoed with his laughter.

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'You no laugh that way,' scolded Full Moon sharply. 'You laugh that way you get debildebil in head.'

I shouldn't wonder at that,' returned Ginger, and for a while they remained silent. F OR nearly an hour—or what Ginger judged to be an hour—he and Full Moon sat on the ledge in the grotto, waiting for they knew not what. There was nothing they could do except wait. There was no sign or sound to indicate that their enemies were outside, but Ginger did not attempt to deceive himself. He knew that Castanelli would not leave the island while he and Full Moon were alive, so he waited with what patience he could muster for the Corsican's next move. That something would happen presently he was certain, but what it was he could not remotely imagine. He looked at Full Moon. She was sitting with her feet dangling within an inch or two of the water, apparently quite content, her simple mind oblivious to danger.

Ginger was about to warn her to get higher on the ledge in case a shark or an octopus should seize her feet, for after his recent experiences these dangers were ever in his mind, when with hardly a ripple the water parted and a brown hand appeared. It closed round the girl's ankle. An instant later the mop head of one of Castanelli's islanders broke the surface.

Full Moon, caught off her guard, was nearly pulled into

the water at the islander's first tug, but by a convulsive twist 138

of her body she managed to seize a piece of projecting coral and hang on to the ledge. The scream she gave reverberated through the cave.

After the first shock of surprise had passed Ginger moved swiftly. He snatched up Full Moon's knife, and without the slightest hesitation drove it down with all the strength of his arm into the brown shoulder. The hand released its grip on Full Moon's ankle immediately, and the native pushed himself clear of the ledge in a swirl of discoloured water. For a moment his right arm disappeared from sight; then it reappeared, gripping a knife. At the same time he made a rush for the ledge. Ginger saw that if the man once gained his objective their plight would be desperate indeed, and he ran forward with his own knife upraised to meet the attack.

But the attack did not materialize. A lithe brown body slipped past him. It was Full Moon, with her arms raised above her head. In her hands she held a piece of coral rather larger than a coconut. The

native saw his danger and, twisting away, prepared to dive, but before he could carry out his intention the coral came down on his head with a thud that made Ginger wince. The islander's body went limp, and then sank slowly in the blue water.

'Me finish him pretty quick,' announced Full Moon, in tones of the greatest possible satisfaction.

Ginger stared at her, for the casual way in which she treated life and death never failed to amaze him. In his heart he knew that he himself would have hesitated to do what she had done—deliberately kill the man. Even when he had struck with the knife he had chosen the man's shoulder as a target when he might have struck him in the head or throat. But Full Moon evidently had no such scruples. With a smile on her face she stood looking down at the body, now lying on the white sand at the bottom of the pool. In a way it pained Ginger to think that she was capable of such an act, although he realized that he had little cause for complaint. It was, he supposed, all a matter of environment. All the years of her life had been spent in danger, real and ever-present, so it was unlikely that she would be disturbed by the sight of death. Sandy had once told him that death was held to be a thing of no account in the Islands, where people took a pride in prepar<sup>139</sup>

ing their own coffins and graves, prizing, them highly until such time as they fulfilled the purpose for which they were made.

Ginger continued to stand on the ledge with his back to the wall, gazing down at the black figure asprawl on the bottom. He felt that he ought to dive in and pull the body up, but he dismissed the inclination. After all, he reasoned, the man had swum in to kill them, so what had happened had really been just retribution. The thing that concerned him most was the fact that the islander had discovered their retreat. Did those outside share that knowledge, he wondered, or had the man only just discovered the cave, and swum in to explore it?

Full Moon took the knife from his hand. Looking to see why she wanted it he saw her prising off another large piece of coral, presumably for ammunition in case there should be another attack. She sang to herself in a queer minor key as she did so, from time to time glancing over her shoulder at the water. During such a glance her song came to an abrupt end, and she uttered a little cry.

Ginger, following the direction of her eyes, thought for a moment that the islander had come to life; but the dead man still lay in the same place, and he realized that it was a second figure under the water,

swimming strongly. It reached the dead man lying spreadeagled on the sand, and paused as if to examine the body. Full Moon stepped forward, with the piece of coral, which she had torn off, raised above her head. Ginger, too, stood ready. But the islander did not come up. Apparently he had learnt what he wanted to know, for after a glance towards the ledge he twisted like an eel and shot back into the cave. Ginger would have prevented this had it been possible, for he knew that the islander would be able to explain to Castanelli just where they had taken refuge; but he could do nothing.

'They know where we are now,' he told Full Moon.

'Maybe Atanelli come,' suggested the girl hopefully, balancing the lump of coral in her hand with eager anticipation.

'Not he,' declared Ginger. 'He no come. He plenty afraid —send black boys.'

Full Moon nodded. 'Aue,' she muttered. 'We kill black boys all same, eh?'

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Ginger smiled in spite of himself. 'You blood-thirsty little wretch,' he admonished her.

'No blood-thirsty—just kill, that's all, ' protested Full Moon. The minutes passed, but the islander did not reappear. Ginger would have given a lot to know what was going on outside. Whatever it was he would have preferred to know the worst. But time went on and nothing happened. The pool was now a blaze of blue light, and he knew that it was broad daylight outside. As is usual in such cases, the inactivity frayed his nerves, but there was nothing he could do. He fell to wondering what Biggles was doing all this time, but conjecture did not help him. Full Moon, seeing him look often towards the cave, offered to swim through to find out what was happening in the cove, but he would not hear of it.

'What Atanelli he do, you reckon?' she inquired cheerfully. 'I don't know, but you may be sure he is up to some devilment,' replied Ginger, wondering if, now that their whereabouts was known, Castanelli would try to dig down to them from the outside. 'I wish something would happen,' he added. 'This standing here doing nothing is awful.'

His wish was speedily fulfilled. Hardly had the words left his lips

when he was flung backwards by a violent explosion that rocked the entire grotto. Acrid fumes and coraldust filled the air, while the water surged over the ledge with such force that he was nearly swept away. Pieces of coral began dropping from the roof into the water, and it was obvious that the whole place might collapse at any moment. After her first scream of fear Full Moon clutched Ginger's arm. 'What Atanelli do?' she gasped.

'I'm afraid he is going to blow the place to pieces with dynamite,' replied Ginger, coughing as the fumes of the explosive reached his lungs. 'I suppose he has had to go to the schooner to get it; that's why there has been a delay,' he explained.

'What we do? You say?' questioned Full Moon plaintively.

Ginger did not know what to do. To swim out through the cave would probably mean that they would be shot by Castanelli, who was doubtless waiting for their heads to ap141

pear above the water. To remain where they were would invite the Corsican to fire another charge of dynamite and bury them for all eternity in the ruins of the grotto. The walls were already cracking. One more charge would certainly cause the whole place to fall in. Either way they were doomed, but of the two deaths Ginger preferred to remain where he was, if only to deny Castanelli the satisfaction of shooting him. 'We stay here,'

he told Full Moon, instinctively crouching back against the wall. 'If we go out Atanelli shoot plenty quick.'

'Me stay,' announced Full Moon philosophically.

There was another nerve-racking period of waiting, but Ginger could now visualize fairly clearly what was going on outside. Castanelli would wait for a few minutes to see if they came out; when they did not appear, he would fire another stick of dynamite and throw it in the hole made by the first, which was somewhere over their heads. That would be the finish.

Ginger put his arm through Full Moon's and leaned back against the wall to wait for the end. He had not long to wait. There was another violent explosion. The flash of it struck downwards through the grotto into the water, to be followed immediately by the splash of falling rock. Parts of the wall caved in. Then, with a loud crack, a large portion of the roof broke away and crashed down into the grotto. The daylight poured in, and it was blue no longer.

So far no rocks had fallen on the narrow ledge on which Ginger and Full Moon crouched. Coughing, Ginger looked up through a cloud of smoke and coral dust at a hole nearly as large as a dining-room table that had appeared in the roof. Above it was the blue sky. For a moment or two there was no sign of life; then Castanelli's head appeared over the edge. A broad smile spread over his face when he saw the two shrinking figures on the ledge. '

You come out,' he ordered.

'We'll say here,' replied Ginger, wondering if he could throw Full Moon's knife accurately enough to hit the man whom he hated most on earth. The Corsican shrugged his shoulders. Quite calmly, as if it were a cigar, he took from his pocket another stick of dynamite with a short fuse attached, and a box of matches. 142

He lit the fuse and raised the dynamite above his head. 'You come out,' he ordered again.

'No!' shouted Ginger.

There came a sound of distant shouting. Castanelli evidently heard it, for he looked round over his shoulder. When he turned his face back to the grotto the smile was no longer on it. Showing his teeth in a snarl of animal rage he hurled the stick of dynamite straight at Ginger. It sped through the air, leaving a trail of pale grey smoke behind it. Ginger watched it fascinated. He could see that even if it did not actually hit him it would fall on the ledge. His first inclination was to jump into the water, for there was no room to run. Then he saw that the dynamite would hit Full Moon, and his reaction was instinctive. Like a cricketer taking a catch he jumped forward and allowed the stick to fall into his hands. Instantly he hurled it back at the hole whence it came. There was no time to think, for as the dynamite showed for a moment against the blue sky there was a terrific explosion, and the next moment he was on his knees shielding his head from the falling debris. He dragged Full Moon towards him and did his best to protect her with his body. The air was full of smoke, and the noise of falling coral. Brushing the dust from his streaming eyes he tried to see what was happening. It was not easy, for the shape of the whole grotto had altered. Pieces of the wall, and the roof, were still falling, and as they fell into the water, blocking the cave, it rose accordingly, so that their ledge was awash. Ginger only saw these things vaguely, for in the horror of the moment it seemed as if the whole world was crumbling to pieces about them. He could still hear shouts outside, but he could see nobody, so he had no idea what was

happening; but presently the smoke began to clear, and he could see more plainly what had happened to the grotto. Most of the roof had disappeared, so that he and Full Moon were, so to speak, at the bottom of a rough basin, the sides being composed of coral, some of which was cracked, and only needed a touch to bring it down. In fact, the whole place appeared likely to cave in at any moment. Of Castanelli there was no sign.

Ginger caught Full Moon by the hand. 'Let us try to get out,' he said tensely. 'If any more coral falls we shall be buried.'

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But Full Moon only stood like one transfixed, listening, with parted lips and shining eyes. Then, suddenly, she let out a blood-curdling yell, and thrusting her knife into the fold of her pareu, starting climbing up the wall towards the open air.

'Be careful. You'll bring the whole place down on us,' yelled Ginger, who, in the back of his mind, was wondering what had become of Castanelli.

But for once Full Moon ignored Ginger's frantic appeal. She went on climbing, heedless of falling rocks, from time to time uttering a piercing cry, not unlike those which could at times be heard in the distance. Altogether she gave Ginger the impression of having suddenly gone out of her mind, and he was by no means sure that she had not. That the shock of the explosion had affected her brain was quite possible, he reflected. Prompted by the fear of what Castanelli might do when she reached the top, he again yelled to her to stop, but although she acknowledged his appeal by shouting something in her own language she went on climbing. In the circumstances all he could do was to follow her. THAT something had happened outside was certain, but apart from the possibility of Castanelli's having been killed or disabled by the stick of dynamite which he had thrown back, Ginger could not imagine what

it was. Full Moon was already more than half-way up the - coral wall, so he exerted every ounce of strength he pos145

essed in order to overtake her, or at least get to the top at the same time. And in this he was successful, for he found a comparatively easy way up, whereas Full Moon had rushed at the wall without troubling to ascertain the least difficult course. Nevertheless, the coral often broke under his weight, and more than once he thought he was bound



to fall; but somehow he managed to hang on and, heedless of torn fingernails, dragged himself over the rim. Full Moon was still six feet below, looking vainly for a way up, for she had come to an impasse. By lying down he could just reach her hand; this was all the support she needed, and in a few seconds she was lying beside him, gasping for breath and wiping the coral-dust from her eyes with the hem of her pareu. The strain of the last minute had been so intense that Ginger had temporarily forgotten Castanelli and his islanders, but now, remembering them, he looked round to see what was happening. This is what he saw. Near at hand lay two of the Solomon Island boys, terribly mutilated, apparently by the explosion. But it was not this that made him stare unbelievably. The whole island seemed to be swarming with hideously painted warriors who yelled like madmen as they chased the scattered members of Castanelli's crew. And this was not all. The 'Scud', with her port wing-tip fractured and hanging loose, so that the tip of it trailed in the water, was floating at an alarming angle on the lagoon. More painted warriors were even then jumping out of the cabin doorway into the water. Others were swimming at an incredible speed towards a long, sleek canoe, which was being paddled towards three swimmers who were making for the schooner. Ginger knew from their mops of hair that two of them were members of Castanelli's crew; the other, swimming much more slowly, was Castanelli himself.

Ginger must be forgiven if he ran up and down in hopeless indecision. He was completely bewildered. He could not make out what was happening. All he could think was that the 'Scud' had returned, only to be attacked by a swarm of native warriors who had arrived simultaneously in the war canoe. And this, it must be admitted, was a reasonable assumption. He perceived also that if his reading of the situation was correct he and Full Moon were

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likely to be the next victims, yet even in these alarming circumstances he was distracted by a tremendous hubbub that arose from the lagoon. The position was very much the same as when he had first emerged from the grotto, except that the two islanders had succeeded in reaching the schooner before being overtaken by the canoe, which had swung round to intercept Castanelli. But it was not this that had caused the outcry. The canoe was no longer being paddled; it still had a certain amount of way on it, but all the warriors were standing up, the better to see something that was happening in the water. It was they who had caused the uproar by their shouting.

Ginger watched, although as yet he could see nothing to justify the commotion. In fact, he wondered why the paddlers had desisted in their efforts to prevent Castanelli from reaching the schooner. But when the water near the swimming man was suddenly broken by the dreadful triangular fin which he knew so well, he understood. There was no need for them to trouble further. The shark would do what they had intended doing, and at the same time relieve them of the responsibility of the Corsican's death. With his heart stone cold inside him, and his eyes still on that formidable dorsal fin, Ginger began running towards the beach. The fin disappeared, and the swimmer, with a terrible cry, thrashed the water with his legs. If by this means he hoped to frighten the shark he appeared to be successful, for again the huge fish broke the surface, its fin cutting a curving white wake in the water. Again Castanelli struck out for the schooner. The canoe was only a short distance away, and it was obvious that those in it could save the wretched swimmer if they would; but it was equally obvious that they had no intention of doing so, for they only leaned on their paddles shouting jeers and taunts at the luckless man in the water.

Ginger reached the edge of the lagoon and pulled up dead. He felt that he was going mad, yet he could not tear his eyes from the awful drama that was being enacted before him.

'Mako, he plenty kai-kai Atanelli,' said a voice at his elbow. He glanced round and saw that it was Full Moon. Her eyes were shining with delight and satisfaction.

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"These kanakas plenty kai-kai us presently," he replied curtly, but Full Moon's only answer was a ripple of laughter.

Ginger turned back to the lagoon in time to see the finish of the tragedy. Castanelli was now very close to the schooner, swimming fast and making a tremendous splash with his feet. It looked as if he would escape, after all. The warriors in the canoe evidently thought so, too, for they suddenly dropped into their seats and began paddling furiously towards the ship. But the shark also appeared to realize that its prey was about to escape. The fin disappeared, and the water swirled as it closed over it. Castanelli clutched at a trailing rope and began to pull himself clear; but he was exhausted, and could only hang helplessly, trying to lift his legs above the surface of the water. There came a dark streak near the schooner's side; a terrible scream that was cut off short, and Castanelli disappeared. Ginger moistened his lips. He was trembling violently and felt sick. Through it all he had

an increasing feeling that this was not really happening, that it was all a dream; either that, or he had been killed by the explosion in the grotto. He was prepared to believe anything, however fantastic. He saw the canoe surge up to the schooner and the warriors begin to scramble up her side; a shot rang out, and one of the warriors fell back with a splash. The others went on. Wild yells rent the air.

Ginger turned to Full Moon, who was watching the scene quite unmoved. 'Where these boys come from?' he asked, as a suspicion slowly took shape in his mind.

'Shell-Breaker, he come,' murmured Full Moon briefly.

The sound of running footsteps behind him made Ginger turn quickly. A warrior was racing towards them, brandishing a club. Had Full Moon not warned him who it was he would have thought that the end had really come at last, but as the warrior drew nearer he saw that the girl was right; behind a grinning mask of white clay he recognized the features of Shell-Breaker. He was laughing. 'Plenty finish all time,' he shouted joyfully as he ran up.

'Where Andy?' cried Ginger.

Shell-Breaker pointed. Ginger spun round and looked

in the direction indicated, which was towards the 'Scud'. 148

So taken up had he been in watching Castanelli's dreadful end that he had forgotten all about the flying-boat. When he had last seen it it was—or he had thought it was—in the hands of the warriors. Somehow it had not occurred to him that Biggles and the others might be there too, but now, to his unspeakable astonishment, he saw Biggles, Algy, and Sandy standing on the centre section. They waved to him when they saw that he was looking in their direction. Had Ginger but known it they had been yelling at him for the last five minutes, but what with the pandemonium made by the warriors, and the drama in the water, he had not heard them.

As soon as he realized that they were really there Ginger dashed along the beach until he was as near as he could get to the flying-boat. Nothing would have induced him to swim out to it, for it was nearly two hundred yards away, so he could only stand on the edge of the lagoon beckoning furiously. He had just remembered the pearls, and was afraid of what the warriors might do. For he had grasped the truth at last; that Biggles and the war canoe had arrived together, and that the warriors were Marquesans from Rutuona.

Biggles was shouting, pointing first towards the schooner and then to the beach, as if he could not make up his mind which way to go. Ginger could not hear what he said, so he beckoned again, frantically, and wiped the perspiration from his bloodstreaked face with relief as the 'Scud's' engines started, and the machine started taxi-ing slowly towards him. Not until it was twenty yards from the beach did Biggles cut the engines, so that at last Ginger could make himself heard. And by that time he knew it was too late, for smoke was pouring from the schooner's portholes and hatches, and the natives jumping clear into the water; the canoe picked them up, and the paddlers backed away from the burning ship.

Biggles was saying something, but Ginger did not listen. 'The pearls! The pearls!' he screamed. 'The pearls are on the schooner. Castanelli found them.'

Too late those on board the flying-boat understood. Ginger dashed into the water and scrambled aboard. 'Castanelli found the pearls!' he gasped. 'He took them aboard with him. They must be in his cabin.'

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Biggles said nothing. He jumped into his seat and again the engines roared. The 'Scud'

whirled round, churning the sea into milky foam, and raced towards the doomed vessel. But long before they got to it all those on the flying-boat knew that the effort was wasted. The schooner was a sheet of flame from stem to stern. It would have been suicide for any one who attempted to board her. Biggles cut the throttle and the engines died suddenly, so that the 'Scud' floated motionless on the water. Not far away a wild chant rose from the warriors who were packed in the war canoe; they, too, were watching the end of the Avarata with the same glee as they had watched the end of her owner.

'Well, that's that,' muttered Sandy, in a resigned voice. 'I never did have any luck with pearls,' he added, with poignant bitterness.

'Pity you couldn't have got here a bit sooner,' muttered Ginger.

'We should have been here hours ago if we hadn't struck a head wind,' put in Biggles quietly.

Ginger smiled grimly. 'I know all about that wind,' he said, realizing that it must have been the same breeze that had caused Castanelli to change his plan and throw him overboard before taking advantage of

it to get away. 'It was nearly the death of me,' he added.

‘It was nearly the death of us, with an overloaded machine and a blooming canoe in tow,’

remarked Algy. ‘Well, I did all I could,’ declared Ginger.

‘You look like it,’ observed Biggles, regarding him curiously. ‘You look as if you’ve been dragged round the reef at the end of a rope.’

‘It was worse than that,’ Ginger told him. ‘I was dragged down to the bottom of the lagoon at the end of a rope. I’ll tell you about that later on.’

‘You’re not seriously hurt, are you?’

Ginger shook his head. ‘Only scratches—and shock,’ he replied. ‘I don’t know what happened to you, but when I tell you what we’ve been through you’ll think I’m a prize romancer.’

‘You mean—you and Full Moon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is she?’

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‘On the island somewhere. I left her there with Shell-Breaker.’

‘Hello, there goes the Avarata,’ said Algy, in a hushed voice, as with a hiss the stillburning remains of the doomed schooner slid slowly out of sight under the water. A cloud of steam rose into the air and a few pieces of debris floated to the surface; apart from that there was nothing to show that the schooner had ever existed.

‘Yes, and there go our pearls,’ remarked Sandy, bitterly.

‘Wouldn’t they be any good if we fished them up?’ asked Algy. Sandy laughed harshly. ‘After being in that fire? They’ll just be a handful of white lime, that’s all.’

For a minute or two nothing more was said. They all stood staring sombrely at the spot where the Avarata had disappeared, thinking of the risks and labour that had been in vain.

‘Well, I suppose it’s no use sitting here moping about it,’ said Biggles

at last. 'We might as well have a spot of something to eat while we're here and then we'll start back for Rutuona.'

'We shall have to find out what has happened to Castanelli's boys, too,' muttered Sandy.

'The whole business will have to be reported to the authorities, of course. As far as Castanelli is concerned—well, he got what he has deserved for a long time, and I don't suppose there'll be many tears shed on his account. I don't know about his crew; they were a bad lot, but the Governor at Tahiti will want to-know what happened to them, so we had better find out—not that I think there is much doubt about it.'

- Nobody answered. Once more the engines were started, and the 'Scud' moved slowly—

almost reluctantly, it seemed—towards the beach.

S SITTING in the sparse shade of the ruins of their first camp, with the painted natives squatting a short distance away, Biggles told Ginger why they had found it necessary to take the flying-boat to Rutuona, and their subsequent adventures, concluding with a description of the towing of the war canoe in the face of a stiff breeze. When he had finished Ginger told his own tale from the time he, Full Moon, and Shell-Breaker were trapped in the grotto by the shark, thus being effectively prevented from returning to the flying-boat. As far as the others were concerned this was the answer to a problem for which they had been unable to supply a reasonable solution. Shell-Breaker had told them a little, but his account had been so fantastic that they could hardly believe it. Ginger also told of the arrival of Castanelli, and his discovery of the pearls by means of the exposure of the biscuit-tin by the waves flung across the island by the hurricane. But when he came to the episode of his being thrown overboard from the schooner, with an iron pipe tied to his waist, Sandy interrupted.

'Here, wait a minute, young feller. Are you sure you didn't dream all this?' he demanded suspiciously.

'Ask Full Moon; she cut me loose and fished me up,' returned Ginger simply.

'Lush! I reckon you'll never go nearer to death and get back again,' declared Sandy.

'You're right,' agreed Ginger. 'I thought I was a goner. When we saw

Castanelli coming back I thought it was about the last straw. Naturally we made for the grotto. Castanelli was blasting us out with dynamite when you arrived. Another five minutes and all you would have found of us was bits and pieces.'

'We heard the explosions and it hurried us up,' declared Biggles. 152

'Well, that's all,' concluded Ginger. 'You saw the finish of the business.'

'Yes, that's all,' said Biggles quietly. 'After what you've been through I should think you'

ve pretty well had enough of the South Seas. We may as well get along home. It won't take us long to put the machine in order. I think we'd better taxi her back to Rutuona and do the repairs here. Of course, if any one feels like starting the whole thing afresh, and making another raid on the pearl-bed, I'm willing to fall in line. But that's really up to Sandy; he has the dangerous work to do.'

'Nay, laddie, it's up to you,' returned Sandy. 'You provide the cash, so it's your privilege to call the tune.'

If only we had been able to save the pearls we should have been well out of the whole business, after all,' murmured Algy regretfully.

'That's true—but it isn't much use thinking about that,' answered Biggles. 'As far as pearls are concerned, we are where we started, but none of us has been hurt, and after the narrow escapes we've had we really have no cause for complaint. I only hope there will be no trouble with the authorities. Which reminds me, we'd better have a word with Roaring Wave about the casualties, so that when we tell our story his version of it will agree with ours. I don't think a single one of those Solomon Island boys got away. If there is a survivor, then he is hiding somewhere, and as far as I'm concerned he can stay there. But I should say that Roaring Wave's crowd killed the lot. Incidentally, we shall have to buy some handsome presents for Shell-Breaker and Full Moon. But for their pluck we shouldn't have got off as lightly as we have. We'll turn them lose in Lo Sing's store and let them help themselves.'

If it hadn't been for Full Moon I shouldn't be here at all,' declared Ginger, looking over to where Full Moon and Shell-Breaker were recounting their adventures to an ejaculating circle of warriors. Biggles waited until they had finished, and then called them over, when he made a short speech extolling their courage, and concluded by telling them that they could have whatever they liked from the

store on Rutuona. 'We lost the pearls,' he said finally, 'but that wasn't your fault.'

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Full Moon frowned as if she did not understand. 'No lost pearls,' she said. Sandy looked up quickly. 'What you say?' he demanded. 'Atanelli, he take pearls on schooner.' He turned to Ginger. 'You're quite sure about that, I suppose?' he went on quickly, with a new hope in his voice.

'Absolutely certain,' answered Ginger. 'I sat next to him in the longboat when we went back to the schooner and he had the tin under his arm. I know the pearls were in it because I could hear them rattling. As soon as we got aboard he took the tin to his cabin—at least, when he came on deck again he hadn't got it, so obviously he must have left them below.'

'And it was immediately afterwards that you were thrown overboard and he sailed away—I think you -said?' questioned Biggles quickly.

'That's right.'

'And then Castanelli came back?'

'Yes.'

'Why did he come back?'

Ginger looked puzzled. He had wondered about that at the time, but in the rush of subsequent events the matter had passed from his mind. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Atanelli, he come back for pearls, I reckon,' put in Full Moon. Sandy rose swiftly to his feet. 'What do you know about pearls?' he asked almost harshly. Full Moon looked up into his face wonderingly. 'Me take pearl,' she explained.

'You take pearl—how come?'

'Me on schooner,' explained Full Moon. 'I lie in sail. Soon hear plenty shouting on island; boys say Castanelli find pearl. Soon Atanelli he come aboard, bring pearl in tin. I watch along window in deck; see Atanelli put pearl in cabin. When he come up on deck I go through window, take pearl.'

'Where you put tin?' almost shouted Sandy, who was nearly beside himself with excitement.



`Me throw in lagoon.'

Sandy let out a yell. 'Did you hear that?' he cried. 'She threw them overboard. That's why Castanelli turned about and came back. He went down to the cabin and found 154

the pearls had gone. No wonder he came back. They're in the lagoon all the time.'

The others were all on their feet. Full Moon looked from one to the other in astonishment; it was clear that she found it difficult to understand why there should be so much fuss over a few pearls. But she grasped the situation. 'Atanelli, he come back for pearl, I reckon,' she said again.

`But why didn't you tell me?' asked Ginger.

`No time,' explained Full Moon. 'You plenty dead, I think.'

`She means that when Castanelli threw you overboard - she forgot all about the pearls,'

said Biggles.

'Aye. I reckon that's it,' agreed Sandy. 'We'll soon find out for certain.' He turned to Full Moon.

`What place you throw tin?' he demanded.

'I show,' replied Full Moon without hesitation.

All was now bustle and excitement. Sandy yelled to Roaring Wave to man the canoe, and they were soon in it, steering according to Full Moon's directions. At the spot where the schooner had lain at anchor when Ginger had been a prisoner she raised her hand, and the canoe came to a stop. She then got over the side into the water, with her face below the surface, looking first one way and then the other at the bed of the lagoon. Once she turned over again to breathe, paddled a little farther away, and went on with her search.

`What about the shark?' cried Ginger, aghast.

'Look around you,' replied Sandy. 'You needn't worry. If that mako shows up here he'll be a dead fish before he knows what's hit him.'

Ginger looked along the side of the canoe and saw a dozen men, muscles tense, hands on the hilts of their knives, ready to dive into

the water the instant danger threatened. At last Full Moon swam back to the canoe and shook the water from her hair. 'Me see,'

she said quietly. For a minute or two she clung to the side of the canoe, breathing deeply, each breath longer than the preceding one. As she exhaled she bent her body like a jackknife to force all the air from her lungs. Finally she took an extra deep breath, and turning head downwards, went down into the depths like an arrow. 155

Ginger often thought about that moment afterwards, for it was the most dramatic he had ever known. The silent lagoon, the long black canoe with its grotesquely carved prow, and the line of grim, painted faces, with eyes boring into the depths, watching for the dangers they understood only too well. Every man was tense, the muscles rippling under his oiled brown skin.

Suddenly there was a slackening of the tension. Full Moon came into sight, shooting towards the surface, her blue pareu clinging to her lithe body. One arm was upraised. In it she held the tin. There was a roar from every man in the canoe as she broke the surface. For a little while she clung to the side of the boat drawing in her breath with that curious whistling sound which Ginger had come to know so well. Then she tossed the tin into the canoe and climbed in herself.

Sandy was on the tin in a flash, and dragged the lid off. 'They're here!' he shouted hoarsely.

Biggles smiled. 'After this trip I shall be ready to believe anything,' he declared. In a few minutes they were back on the beach, in an atmosphere very different from that of an hour previously. Full Moon was the heroine of the occasion—as indeed she deserved to be. Sandy held the pearl-tin under his arm, declaring that he would not lose sight of it again until the pearls were sold.

'Then let's get back to Rutuona for a start,' suggested Biggles. 'If we get along right away we can be back before dark. The machine is in no case to face another hurricane.'

So they took their places in the 'Scud', allowing Full Moon and Shell-Breaker to travel with them. In fact, much to her delight, Full Moon was permitted to sit next to Biggles in the control cabin and work the throttle. The war canoe was taken in tow, and under an azure sky the 'Scud', with her engines roaring, surged through the entrance to the lagoon for the last time.

A quarter of an hour later Ginger stood up and looked back. All he

could see was a few tattered palm-fronds swinging in the breeze. Even as he watched they sank below the horizon, and in spite of its grim associations it gave him a feeling of sadness to think that he would never see the

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island again. 'I'm coming back here again one day,' he told Sandy confidently. Sandy chuckled. 'That's what we all say,' he grinned. 'The Islands get you that way.'

### The End of the Trail

The return of the warriors to Rutuona with Full Moon, and the story of how Castanelli had died, created a sensation which, Roaring Wave declared, demanded a feast to celebrate it, and preparations were begun forthwith. The white men were the guests of honour, and in the glare of many torches the banquet began. Ginger, seated on a mat between Full Moon and Shell-Breaker, was ready for it, for it was a long time since he had eaten anything substantial. Leaf plates were provided, and Ginger's was heaped in turn with pork and popoe, sweet potatoes, shark's sweetbreads, and other local delicacies, to say nothing of unlimited quantities of fruits of many sorts. Every time he paused in eating Full Moon or Shell-Breaker would shout, Wail Kai!, and push more food towards him. Apart from that there was very little talking, for in Polynesia a meal is something to be taken seriously.

When all had eaten to repletion the guests reclined on their mats, while the children rushed out to eat what was left over, as was their privilege. Then, in the orange light of the flickering torches, the warriors began to recount their version of the end of the Avarata. Ginger did not hear the finish. Worn out, he retired from the scene, and, flopping down on the floor of their hut, was instantly asleep. It was broad daylight when he awoke, to find that the others had been at work on the machine for several hours, and the job of mending the broken wing nearly complete. By noon they were ready to depart. When they walked down to the beach with their belongings they found all the people of the island gathered there—men, women, and children sitting on the sand. As the white men approached they began singing their moving song of farewell:

Popoe is the staple article of food in the Marquesas. It is a sticky yellow paste manufactured from the fruit of the breadfruit-tree.

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`Farewell to you,

You go to a far-distant land.

There you will stay, and you will weep for me. Ever I shall be here, and my tears will fall like rain. The time has come. Farewell.'

Many of the singers were sobbing. Full Moon and Shell-Breaker, dressed in the flimsy finery they had selected at Biggles's invitation from Lo Sing's store, sat apart from the others, weeping unrestrainedly, their pareus lifted to their eyes. Their distress was so affecting that it was all Ginger could do to keep his own tears back. He ran over to them and held their hands.

`Kaoha, my friends,' he whispered huskily. 'I shall not forget you. One day I shall come back.'

They clung to him, imploring him to stay, but the others were calling, and in the end he had to tear himself away. With his eyes misty with tears he ran down the beach and splashed out to the machine. The engines were started. The cabin door slammed. The engines roared and the 'Scud' carved a trail of foam across the bay for the last time. As it rose into the air Ginger sat silent at a side window, his heart heavy with grief, taking his last view of Rutuona.

Sandy clapped him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'You'll come back. Once you have been to the Islands you can't forget them, and one day they will call you back.'

There is little more to tell. The 'Scud's' first landfall was Tahiti, where Sandy, who knew the Governor well, made a full report on the loss of the Avaruta, and the death of her captain. The others confirmed his statements, which were accepted without question. Indeed, the Governor hinted that in his opinion Castanelli was well out of the way, for his illegal practices, including the selling of liquor to the natives, had been known for some time, but it had been difficult to obtain evidence to convict him. Several leading Parisian pearl-buyers were in Papeete, and to them Sandy sold most of the pearls, retaining only the very largest, for which he thought Biggles would get a better price in Paris. Nevertheless, those sold on the island not only paid for the entire expedition but left an ample margin for division among the partners.

Sandy remained in Tahiti, announcing that he was going

to buy a schooner and set up as a trader; but the others suspected that the lure of pearls would be too great for him, and it was far more likely that he would fit out his schooner for another raid on the pearl-bed.

By the time they reached Australia the machine was too badly in need of a complete overhaul for them to consider flying home in it, so Biggles sold it for what it was worth to an operating company and out of the proceeds bought three tickets for air travel to England.

'It will be a change to sit still and let somebody else do the work,' he remarked with a smile, as they all went aboard.



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